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Editors' Note

The emergence of Dalit literature in languages such as Marathi, Kannada, Telugu, Hindi, Gujarati, Punjabi, Malayalam, and Tamil in recent decades is an important and encouraging sign of our times. Once it launched itself, it spread like forest fire, gaining further momentum during the birth centenary celebrations of Dr Ambedkar in 1991. Many of these works were translated into English and helped disseminate Dalit voices giving the genre a visibility it had lacked before. It is noteworthy that this 'help' in making Dalit writing available to a wider readership was provided by translators who were themselves non-Dalits. Though some literary critics viewed these developments with scepticism and others were dismissive, Dalit literature went on to make an undeniable impact in all spheres.

This volume is a result of an invitation from Mini Krishnan of Oxford University Press (OUP) and it focuses on the diversity of Dalit writing in Tamil by tracing its history back to over a period of a hundred years. The global interest in local cultures and marginalized literatures which encouraged the 'Translation Revolution' of the 1990s compelled us to introduce the singularity of Tamil Dalit writing translated into English. Indeed, known to us, and at the time of the printing of this book, no such volume focusing exclusively on Tamil Dalit writing exists even in Tamil.

When we got involved in the selection of materials, it was the stereotypes that had begun to afflict Dalit writing that we wanted to avoid, allowing ourselves to move in directions to which the source materials led us. Even though Bama's *Karukku* is widely celebrated as a Dalit autobiography in Tamil, it did not trigger a series of Dalit autobiographies in the same language. This lack of interest in autobiography as a form of self-expression on the part of Dalit writers, and their tendency to turn towards other forms of creativity instead, was a phenomenon that became our guiding principle in selecting the material for this collection.

Translation of literatures from other unrecognized and marginalized communities of the world into Tamil also helped Dalit writers from

Tamil Nadu to place the caste question in a wider context. Besides sharpening the discussions on Dalit writing, this comparative perspective led to some self-analysis and encouraged the writers to think of new ways of representing the violence unleashed in the name of caste. It is this turn towards the politics of experience and the anxiety to represent it that marks the difference between the Dalit writing of Tamil Nadu and those of other regions in India. This 'difference' seems to have a hidden connection with the history of the Tamils. The recovery of evidence pointing to Buddhist revivalist movements in this region in the last decade of the nineteenth century, as found in the writings and activities of Pundit Iyothee Thass and sustained by his followers in the first half of the twentieth century, testified to this important aspect of history which has been ignored even by distinguished historians. Such a construction of a 'Tamil Buddhism' when read along with the recent archaeological discoveries seems to offer a non-Hinduized account of the Tamil region, its spirit and culture. It is in this context that this anthology initiated by OUP is unique.

To the Tamil Dalit writers and poets (or their heirs as is the case with some of the selections), who readily gave their consent to be included in this volume, we express our thanks and solidarity. When the translators—some of them award-winning—were approached to help with this anthology, they were happy to collaborate; they travelled with us on the challenging journey towards grasping and responding to the complexity of the material. To them our thanks and gratitude. For the translators and the editors, the process of translating/editing became part of an overall engagement with the caste question. We are grateful to Mini Krishnan for facilitating such a fruitful interaction and for meticulously working with the translators and editors to improve several drafts and arrive at the final version.

We would like to acknowledge the Government Archives, Chennai, and express our sincere appreciation and gratitude to the following sponsors who generously supported this milestone venture: Mrs Valli Alagappan and the late Mrs Sivakami Narayanan of MR AR Educational Society; Mr M.A. Alagappan of the Murugappa Trust; and Mr C. Ramakrishna—advocate and philanthropist. For supporting Mini Krishnan's initial surveys undertaken for this project six years ago, we wish to thank Dr Hannah Henderson and Dr Alice Cicolini of the British Council, and the late Dr K. Rajaratnam of CRENYO. We would also like to record our gratitude to Dr S. Armstrong for being a constant support, to Dr D.Venkataramanan for offering valuable suggestions on the drafts, to G. Sujatha who helped make significant alterations to the final draft, and to Stalin Rajangam for his timely inputs about some writers and sources. We express our appreciation for the support we received from K. Vijayalakshmi, Menaka Rajaram, and Isabel Fernandes, secretaries at OUP, who held all the threads together and helped Mini Krishnan manage the fatiguing pace we set.

[Readers will find spelling variation of the same words on different pages of the book because we decided to maintain unaltered, the way certain words were spelt in texts drawn from the early twentieth century.]

RAVIKUMAR
R. AZHAGARASAN

General Introduction*

There is little doubt that the appearance and rise of Dalit writing is one of the most important developments in twentieth-century Indian literature. Although it belongs to the century we just left behind, the recovery of Dalit history helps us trace the origins of 'Dalit literature' to ancient Buddhist or medieval anti-caste movements. In the history of political discourse, there are instances which show the prevalence of the thoughts even before they get a place in history. Similarly, numerous bits of evidence show that even before the birth of the word 'Dalit', there was a recorded history of the 'untouchables'' fight against discrimination and literary expressions that spoke about it. A turn towards this recovered history of the regions may help alter our vision of Dalit literature.

History of Dalit Identity

The history of untouchability in other parts of India is not the same as what is obtained in Tamil Nadu; here, it is linked to the establishment of the Vedic-Brahmin religion. Unlike in other parts of India, since Buddhism and Jainism thrived for a longer time in Tamil Nadu—up to the fifteenth century†—the Vedic-Brahmin religion and the practice of untouchability that accompanied it could make only a belated entry.

* Substantial parts of this General Introduction are from Ravikumar's 'Writing to Lose Their Patience', in S. Viswanathan, *Dalits in Dravidian Land: Frontline Reports on Anti-Dalit Violence in Tamil Nadu (1995–2004)*, trans. by S. Anand (Chennai: Navayana Publishing, 2005), pp. xi–xxxviii.

† According to Mayilai Seeni Venkatasamy, Buddhism was introduced to Tamil Nadu in third century BCE during the reign of emperors Asoka and Mahendra. See Venkatasamy, *Bavuthamum Thamzihum* (Tirunelveli: The South India Saiva Siddantha Works Publishing Society Tinnevelly Ltd, 1940). Art historian Vidya Dehejia argues that 'the Buddhist faith persisted in the Tamil country with greater strength than has hitherto been realised' in Dehejia, 'The Persistence of Buddhism in India', P. Pal (ed.), *A Potpourri of Indian Art* (Bombay: Marg, 1988). George Michell says Buddhism lingered in the Tamil region upto the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Michell, *Architecture and Art of Southern India* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995). Several

According to some historians, untouchability existed even in the Sangam period, but it was not based on birth.* Another group argues that such untouchability was based on profession.† Both these schools of thought base their conclusions on classical literature, such as the *Ettuttokai* (Eight Anthologies) and the *Pattuppaattu* (The Ten Idylls), believed to have been written between second century and third century CE. Many scholars point to a verse in *Purananuru* which has a reference to 'Parayan', classified today as a Scheduled Caste. This verse, whose authorship is attributed to Mangudi Kizhar, says:

Tudiyan, paanan, parayan, katamban endru
in-naangu allaadu kudiyum illai

(Other than the Tudiyan drummers and the Paanan singers
and the Parayans and the Katambans, there are no clans)

However, there is no reference to caste here. Other than in this verse, the word 'Parayan' does not figure anywhere in *Purananuru*. Historian K.R. Hanumanthan points out that these four clans belong to the mullai region,‡ and that the word *kudi* in Tamil denotes not 'caste' but 'clan' (p. 131).§

Hanumanthan, who argues that the *pulayan* and *ilicinan* in the Sangam songs refer to those engaged in 'unclean' work, asserts that *pulaithi* does not refer to a Pulayan's wife. He also says that it cannot

statues of the Buddha have been found and continue to be discovered in different parts of Tamil Nadu. See B. Jambulingam's PhD thesis, 'Buddhism in the Chola Country' (Thanjavur: Tamil University, 2000), which lists sixty granite images of the Buddha in Perambalur, Tiruchi, Thanjavur, Thiruvarur, and Pudukkottai districts, adding at least sixteen to the earlier recorded images of Buddhas. Also see S. Anand, 'Bodhi's Tamil Afterglow', *Outlook*, 19 July 2004; and Ravikumar, 'Buddhar Desam', *Kalachuvadu*, July 2004.

* See, for instance, N. Subramanian, *Sangam Polity* (Madras: Asia Publishing House, 1966).

† See K.R. Hanumanthan, *Untouchability: A Historical Study up to 1500 AD with Special Reference to Tamil Nadu* (Madurai: Koodal Publishers, 1979); and 'Evolution of Untouchability in Tamil Nadu up to AD 1600', in Aloka Parasher-Sen, *Subordinate and Marginal Groups in Early India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 125–56.

‡ The Sangam poets classified the Tamil country into distinct *tinai* or eco-types of *marutham* (agricultural land), *neythal* (coast), *mullai* (forest), *kurinji* (hill/mountain), and *paalai* (arid/desert region).

§ George Hart on the contrary translates kudi as caste rather than clan. See George L. Hart and Hank Heifetz (trans.), *Purananuru* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2002), p. 191.

be claimed definitively that the Pulayas were treated as a separate community or that they were segregated.

Those keen on highlighting the distinctness and speciality of the Parayars delight in pointing to this verse in *Purananuru*. Non-Dalit commentators understand this to mean that the discrimination and oppression of the Parayars/Dalits is not of recent origin and they derive solace in the belief that untouchability is as old as the Sangam period.* Besides, all references to Ilicinan, *Kadayan*, and Pulayan are presumed to denote Parayan. Such assertions by scholars merely betray their caste bias. My inference is that Verse 335 in *Purananuru* could well be a latter-day interpolation. Not only were most of these verses fragmented, 'there's little that's known about those who anthologized or compiled them'.† In this anthology which contains 400 verses, those after Verse 266 were found in a mutilated state. In most of these verses the first two lines are not available, and in several verses a few lines have been admittedly 'reconstructed'. Referring to Verse 335, Iyothee Thass strongly refuted the possibility of 'Parayar untouchability' during the Sangam period and questioned the authenticity of the work in the form in which it is presented and interpreted. He claimed that the 'knowledgeable Dravidian Buddhists' were defeated by the 'crooked machinations of arya-mlechchas' and the defeated Buddhists were later relegated to the category of 'untouchables'. Ambedkar, too, accepts that the practice of Buddhism was one of the reasons for the origin of untouchability.‡ It is for this reason that we doubt the *Purananuru* song.

The habit of driving away 'Aryan-Brahmins' if they entered the Parayar settlements has continued until recent times. In this context, the experience of communist leader P. Ramamurthy, a Brahmin, would be illustrative.§

In the summer of 1925, I stayed in my maternal grandfather's house in Nallezhundur. This village is on the Peralam–Karaikkal route, a mile from the

* Though historians do not agree upon the specific dates, the Sangam period is slotted between third century BCE and second century CE. In myths and the popular psyche, the Sangam era dates back to more than ten thousand years.

† See Publisher's Preface, *Purananuru*, 2nd edn (Chennai: New Century Book House, 1981), pp. 3–4. This is the standard edition of *Purananuru* in Tamil used today.

‡ B.R. Ambedkar, 1990 [1948], 'Untouchables: Who Are They and How They Become Untouchables', *BAWS*, Vol. 7, 311–20.

§ P. Ramamurthy, *Viduthalai Porum Dravida Iyakkamum* (Chennai: Pazhaniappa Brothers, 1983), pp. 139–40.

Ambagarathur railway station. There was a major temple festival in Kandangudi happening at that time. Congress leaders A. Rengasamy Iyengar and Rangasamy Pillai attended the festival. I went to Kandangudi hoping to see them. There were no buses then. I went by foot. When I was taking a shortcut through the fields, there was a *cheri* [settlement] of harijans. Influenced by Gandhi's propaganda in 1919, I did not practise untouchability. I entered the *cheri*.

Immediately, the inhabitants of the *cheri*—men and women—surrounded me and began to wail. I did not understand why. When I pacified them and enquired, 'Master, you are a Brahmin. If a Brahmin enters our *cheri*, the *cheri* will be ruined,' they replied. Despite my reassurance that these were baseless superstitions and no ruin would befall them, they were not convinced. Then an elderly man came. He said, a ritual to ward off evil would settle the issue. They circled me with three mud pots of water and broke them before me. This was the ritual! Subsequently, they not only asked me to leave the *cheri*, but also counselled me against entering other *cheris*.

This proves that Iyothee Thass's contention is not baseless. When certain non-Brahmin castes accepted the supremacy of Brahmins and became caste Hindus, those who resisted the very entry of Brahmins into their settlements and remained outside the Hindu fold became today's 'untouchables'.

Besides Parayars, the Pallars (who are today predominant in the southern districts) too could have had a Buddhist origin. The term 'Pallars' is a corruption of 'Mallars' referred to in Sangam literature, asserts T. Gnanasekaran.* He cites ancient grammar treatises *Diwakara Nighandu* and *Pinkala Nighandu* as sources for his claim. Gnanasekaran and Gurusamy Siddhar believe that the Pallars were once a ruling community who later became agricultural labourers and were further stigmatized as 'untouchables' by Brahmins.

Colonial anthropologist Edgar Thurston's claim that Pallars were called thus because they lived in *pallams* (low-lying areas)† is refuted by Hanumanthan who argues that 'a large number of them are found in dry table lands such as Salem and Coimbatore'.‡ Another hypothesis is that Pallars are descendants of the Pallavas. It is notable that Vanniyars, also known as Pallis, claim descent from the Pallavas. Pallars, who prefer to call themselves Devendrakula Vellalars today, trace their lineage to

* Gurusamy Siddhar and T. Gnanasekaran (eds), *Tamizhar Panpaattu Varalaru* (Coimbatore: Tamizhar Panpaattu Aayvu Manram, 1996), pp. 17–33.

† Edgar Thurston and K. Rangachari, *Castes and Tribes of South India*, Vol. IV (of seven volumes) (Madras: Government Press, 1909), pp. 476–7.

‡ Hanumanthan, *Untouchability*, p. 116.

Lord Indira. According to Iyothee Thass, the word Indira is derived from *Aindiram*. The emperor of Magadha, Siddhartha, is said to have controlled his five senses and acquired the name Aindiram,* corrupted later as Indira. The Buddhist monasteries were known as Indira-vyaram (*viharas*), and their festival was known as Indira-vizha.† Viewed in this context, the Pallars' claim that they are descendants of Indira can be interpreted as an indication of their former Buddhist roots.

As for today's Arunthathiyars, found predominantly in the western parts of Tamil Nadu, they claim they were termed 'Sakkiliyars' by the Nayaka king, Tirumalai Nayakar, in the seventeenth century. According to K.S. Singh, 'They migrated from Andhra Pradesh as a service group along with other Telugu-speaking immigrants during the reign of Telugu kings/chiefs in some parts of Tamil Nadu.'‡ However, a section of the politically conscious Arunthathiyars today claim a Tamil origin, and they prefer to be known as Adi Tamilars.§ Another claim is that Sakkiliyar is a corruption of Sakkiyar/Sakya, thereby bestowing a Buddhist past to this community of Dalits as well.¶

When we examine the history of untouchability, it becomes clear that it originated in different times in different places in India. Even within Tamil Nadu, different Dalit communities have different histories of being relegated to the category of 'untouchables'. Though there's a commonality in the trends in northern and southern India as regards defeated Buddhists being stigmatized as 'untouchables', it was only several centuries after untouchability became institutionalized in northern India, where the Vedic-Brahmin religion acquired dominance that the practice entered the Tamil country. In the Tamil country, Buddhism had been alive for a longer period (up to fifteenth century CE); it is therefore not surprising that the practices of the Vedic-Brahmin religion did not establish themselves easily.**

* In Tamil, the human senses are called *indiram*. *Aindu* is Tamil for five. Hence aindu+indiram = aindiram.

† The celebration of Indira-vizha is recorded in the Sangam epics *Manimekalai* and *Silappadikaram*.

‡ K.S. Singh, *The Scheduled Castes* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 293.

§ R. Adhiyaman, 'Mozhi Adaiyalam, Ina Adaiyalam, Saathi Adaiyalam: Arundhatiyar Edirkollum Prachinaikkal', in Ravikumar (ed.), *Dalit Kalai, Ilakkiyam, Arasiyal* (Nyeveli: Dalit Kalaivizha Kuzhu, 1996), pp. 134–8.

¶ Buddhamithran (interview), in Sugan and Shobasakthi (eds), *Kaurppu* (Puthanatham: Adaiyalam, 2002), pp. 163–86.

** The Sangam literary texts occasionally refer to *andanar* and these are claimed

Inscribed Evidence

Those who talk of caste hierarchy being thousands of years old do so only to emphasize the difficulty in uprooting the caste system; this theory helps create the impression that it cannot be easily altered. Although it is commonly believed that the system of untouchability is an ancient one, this presumption flies in the face of evidence obtained by research. Epigraphist Y. Subbarayulu's views on when the caste system took root in Tamil Nadu would be pertinent here.*

It is only in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries that there is clear manifestation of caste formation. Of course, 'caste' is met with as a rudimentary social feature of the Tamil society even in the ninth and tenth centuries. A sort of stratification had taken form by the beginning of the eleventh century. Two Thanjavur inscriptions of Rajaraja I dated AD 1014 supply us information relating to the separate quarters for landholders (*ur-irukkai*), artisans (*kammana-ceri*), and the *paraiya* (*parai-ceri*), respectively. A lengthy inscription by Virarajendra at Gangaikondacholapuram (GKC), gives almost similar descriptions of settlements in Thanjavur and Tiruchirapalli districts in AD 1068. Castes lower in hierarchy than the Brahmins are also referred to in some records, but in very general terms. This hierarchy became elaborated during the course of the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

Reinforcing Subbarayulu's findings, we find that, from *Periyapuranam* to *Kapilar Akaval*,† various works of literature supportive of the caste system emerged only after the twelfth century.

The false stories propagated about those who were relegated to the status of 'untouchables' only served to strengthen the practice of untouchability. According to Iyothee Thass, the unscrupulous 'pseudo-Brahmins' spread themselves all over the Tamil country and killed the

to be the equivalent of latter-day Brahmins. But andanar could refer to any priestly class or the Jaina and Buddhist monks. The Brahmins as we know them today established themselves in the Tamil country only during the Pallava period (seventh to tenth centuries); it is only in the subsequent Chola period with the *brahmadeya* settlements that the Brahmins come to dictate social, cultural, and political terms and vedic religion finds a grounding in Tamil society. See Burton Stein, *Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1980).

* Y. Subbarayulu, *Studies in Chola History* (Chennai: Surabhi Pathippagam, 2001), p. 21.

† Akaval is a form of poetry. The reference here is not to the Kapilar of the Sangam period who contributed to *Purananuru*, but to the Kapilar who is placed around the thirteenth century.

Buddhist kings and monks by impaling them and crushing them in oil-presses. They also captured the Buddhist monasteries, demeaned the Buddhists by terming them Parayas, and concocted several stories about 'paraya lowliness'.*

Iyothee Thass's position has been strengthened by Noburu Karashima's research.† Studies that talk of Indian villages as little republics and self-sufficient units have been effectively disproved by Karashima.

Karashima bases his studies on the two large stone inscriptions in the Thanjavur Big Temple and the inscription in the Gangaikondacholapuram temple. The Thanjavur inscription lists details of forty villages while the GKC inscription mentions seven villages. Karashima has prepared a table that pertains to thirty-three villages mentioned in the Thanjavur inscription and the seven villages listed in the GKC inscription. Of these forty villages, five are considered towns (*nagaras*). These inscriptions reveal that people belonging to certain castes had separate habitations. In the administrative orders of that period, there are details of three types of settlements—the settlement of *ooraar* called *oor-nattham*, the *para-cheri*, and the *kammaana-cheri*. Besides these three, there were also the *kudi-irukkai* (place where the kudis live), *eezha-cheri* (the settlement of toddy-tappers), *theenda-cheri* (the settlement of 'untouchables'), *thalaivai-cheri* (where those who controlled the flow of water from the main canal lived), *thani-cheri* (the temple settlement), *vannara-cheri* (where washerpersons lived), and other settlements.

We are given to understand that even when communities were thus living segregated from one another, this had not become a permanent feature. It is not clear which community lived in kudi-irukkai. Kudi (settlement) could be understood variously as *uzhu-kudi* (tillers), a family, or a community of people. Since kudi-irukkai is mentioned along

* See *Iyothee Thassar Sinthanaigal*, Vol. 2, p. 459. Iyothee Thass argues that the contemptuous use of paraya was extended to other life-forms as well; hence, a mongrel is called a 'pariah' dog and a bird like the mynah is termed 'brahmini' mynah.

† Noburu Karashima, 'Grama Samugangal: Karpanayum Unmayum', in *Varalatruppokkil Thennaga Samugam*, Vol. 1: *Cholar Kalam (850–1300)* (Thanjavur: Tamizhaga Tholliyal Kazhagam, 1995), pp. 64–80. This is a translation of the English version, 'The Village Community in Chola Times: Myth or Reality', *Journal of the Epigraphical Society of India*, Vol. VIII, 1981. Surprisingly few contemporary historians have followed up on the path-breaking research by Karashima and Subbarayulu.

with oor-nattham and para-cheri settlements, those who did not belong to the latter two categories could have lived in kudi-irukkai. According to Karashima, kudi could refer to sharecroppers known as uzhu-kudi. Other than these kudis, there was an area called *kanimuttroottu* allotted to astrologers and a settlement called *maruttuvaperu* for doctors. However, these do not appear to have been separate, segregated settlements.

Of the forty villages that find a place in Karashima's table, it is only in twenty—nineteen in Thanjavur and one in GKC—that the mention of a para-cheri is to be found. Within this, there is a specific reference to *uzha-parayar*. Since those engaged in agricultural labour are referred to specifically as uzha-parayar, we may conclude that the parayars may have engaged in other kinds of non-agricultural labour. While only twenty places are listed by Karashima as having a para-cheri, all the five towns (nagaras) had a para-cheri.

The names of the tanks (*kulams*) in these towns carry the names of various communities as prefixes. For example, the tank in the Parayar settlement was called the Parayar-kulam. Of the forty villages, only twenty-nine had tanks and twenty-two had at least one temple; in fourteen places there was more than one temple. However, there is no reference to specific communities which worshipped at these temples. In five places there were Ayyan temples and in ten villages there were Pidari temples. Ayyan is one of the Tamil names for Buddha.* Pidari refers to the Buddhist deity Sambapathy. *Manimekalai*, the Tamil epic, refers to Sambapathy and says she was worshipped throughout India as a guardian deity.†

Pidari means the one who rids (*haari*) a person of pain (*pida*). Since Sambapathy-amman warded off the troubles that visited good people, she was also called Pidari. Similarly, Buddhist shrines, known as *Saastas*, were later made into Ayyanar temples as part of village deities, according

* Venkatasamy, *Bavuthamum Thamzihum*, pp. 174–96. He points out that the Buddha in the Tamil country was known as Saattan, Ayyan, Munceswaran, Arugan, Dharman, Dharmaraja, Satavahanan, and several other localized names.

† 'Being the ancient deity of the Sambu peninsula (Jambu in Sanskrit), Sambu is her first name. Her place of dwelling is Sambapathy. Later, because of its association with Kaveri, Sambapathy came to be known as Kaveripoompattinam. In the contemporary period, Sambapathy has come to be known as Pidari, says U.V. Swaminatha Iyer in a footnote to the volume of *Manimekalai* edited by him. See *Manimekalai* (6th edn) (Chennai: Dr U.V. Swaminatha Iyer Nool Nilayam, 1981 [1898]), p. 456. This Sangam classic authored by Sittalai Sattanar is said to have been written before second century CE.

to Venkatasamy.* Examined in this light, it would appear that the Ayyanar and Pidari temples that figure in Karashima's table were those at which Buddhists formerly worshipped and that these people came to be stigmatized in a later period as 'untouchables'.

These epigraphs/inscriptions also have details regarding cremation grounds. Of the forty villages listed, only twenty-four had cremation grounds. Of these, eight villages had a separate cremation ground for Parayars. Not all the villages with a para-cheri had a separate cremation ground for the Parayars. Similarly, other settlements such as theenda-cheri, eezha-cheri, or kammana-cheri did not seem to have had separate cremation grounds set aside for them.

In this table, what is most noteworthy pertains to the theenda-cheri. Of the forty villages in Karashima's list, only two had a theenda-cheri. Even in villages that had a para-cheri, a theenda-cheri is also listed. This is enough for us to conclude that Parayars of that time were not subjected to the stigma of untouchability. Another minor community, other than Parayars, were designated 'untouchables' at the time. We call them a minor community because in the forty villages listed, they figure only in two. From the inscriptions, it does not appear that this community had a separate temple, tank, or cremation ground. They must have either had access to the temples, tanks, and cremation grounds of other communities or they must have been forbidden to use these. Examining the various details about the forty villages we realize that, even when the settlements were separate, a complete segregation had not appeared in respect of the use of temples, tanks, and cremation grounds.

All the available textual and inscriptional evidence points to the conclusion that untouchability was institutionalized in Tamil Nadu only after eleventh century CE. Subsequently, this practice has strengthened and deepened. The annihilation of Buddhism and Jainism through violence forms a backdrop to these developments.

Brahmin-Non-Brahmin Alliance

Even though there are commonalties between north and south India as regards the development of Brahmin hegemony, there are also several differences. According to historian Burton Stein, the main difference lies in the manner in which the Vedic-Brahmin religion triumphed over Buddhism and Jainism in the two regions. In the north, the invasion of

* Venkatasamy, *Bavuthamum Tamizhum*, p. 178.

Huns from the north-west, the claiming and acceptance of Buddha as an incarnation of Vishnu, and intermarriage between prominent Buddhist and Vaishnava and Saiva devotees, including members of royalty, led to the 'peaceful displacement of Jainism and Buddhism'. By contrast, the south witnessed 'the violent suppression of both [Buddhists and Jains] by devotees of the new devotional worship of Siva ... and the proud boast of the new kings of Pallava and Pandyan kingdoms that they had slaughtered Jains. This has always embarrassed modern historians, but it has not moved them to offer explanations for these murderous claims.'*

In this violent suppression of Buddhists and Jains, the alliance formed by Brahmin and non-Brahmin Hindus played a crucial role.† Since Tamil Nadu did not have an equivalent of the Kshatriya castes found in the north, a section of the Shudras joined with the Brahmins to unleash this violence.

> While the evidence of tension between Brahman and non-Brahman savants and religious teachers becomes manifest in the thirteenth century and lays the foundation for some of the conflict between the two in the twentieth century, the tension is not that between maintainers of an indigenous culture against external intruders, but largely that of cultural variants and their upholders seeking the greatest favour from those in a position to support them.‡

According to Stein, the 'Brahman-high non-Brahman' alliance remained intact till 1800 and played a crucial role in the institutionalization of untouchability and the caste system in Tamil Nadu. It was the enthusiastic participation of the non-Brahmins that led to Buddhism and Jainism in Tamil Nadu being destroyed, the Vedic-Brahmin religion taking root, the caste system getting strengthened, and untouchability becoming entrenched.

During the British colonial period, the various strategies adopted by non-Brahmin communities to counter Brahmin hegemony—similar to the struggles in the thirteenth century to win the favours of rulers—were merely attempts to seek a share in the power structure, the

* Burton Stein, 'Situating Precolonial Tamil Politics and Society', in *Plenary Session Papers, Eighth World Tamil Conference* (Chennai: International Association of Tamil Research, 1995), p. 51.

† According to Stein, 'Religion was made to serve the Brahman-peasant alliance which constituted the underpinning of localised self-governing territories in South India from the eighth to fourteenth centuries.' See his *Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 87.

‡ Stein, *Peasant State*, p. 52.

bureaucracy, and other spheres of public life. Indoctrinated as we have been by contemporary histories of non-Brahmin antagonism towards Brahmins,* it may be a little difficult for us to accept this relationship between Brahmins and non-Brahmins which alternates between conflict and cooperation. But if we understand the unique nature of Hindu society, it becomes easier to comprehend this relationship. Ambedkar's insight would be helpful here:

> Men live in a community by virtue of the things they have in common. What they must have in common in order to form a community are aims, beliefs, aspirations, knowledge, a common understanding. Or to use the language of the Sociologists, they must be like-minded .... Participation in a group is the only way of being like-minded with the group.†

Discussing the evils of 'isolation' and benefits of 'endosmosis' among social groups, Ambedkar dwells upon the relationship between 'touchables' and 'untouchables':

> The significant fact about the Hindus is that before they are Hindus they are members of some caste. The castes are so exclusive and isolated that the consciousness of being a Hindu would be the chief guide of a Hindu's activity towards a non-Hindu. But as against a Hindu of different caste, his

* This is a result of both the non-Brahmin movement's self-representation as well as the reinforcement of this 'common sense' by academic works produced by a section of English-speaking Dravidian intellectuals such as M.S.S. Pandian ('Notes on the Transformation of Dravidian Ideology: Tamil Nadu, *c.* 1900–1940', paper presented at Seminar on Ethnicity and Nation Building, Centre for South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of Madras, 21–23 March 1994; and 'Beyond Colonial Crumbs: Cambridge School, Identity Politics and Dravidian Movement', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 18–25 February 1995); V. Geetha and S.V. Rajadurai [*Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium: From Iyothee Thass to Periyar* (Calcutta: Samya, 1998)]; V. Geetha ('Re-Writing History in the Brahmin's Shadow', *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, 25–26 December 1993); and S. Anandhi ['The Women's Question in the Dravidian Movement *c.* 1925–1948', in Anupama Rao (ed.) *Gender and Caste: Feminism, Dalit Women, Caste, Labour Conditions, India* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2003), pp. 141–63]. However, Oxford historian David Washbrook [*The Emergence of Provincial Politics: the Madras Presidency 1870–1920* [Cambridge: 1976 and *South India: Political Institutions and Political Change*, New Delhi, 1976)] and Berkeley's Eugene Irschick [*Politics and Social Conflict in South India: The Non-Brahman Movement and Tamil Separatism, 1916–1929* (Berkeley, 1969); and *Tamil Revivalism in the 1930s* (Madras, 1986)] engage critically with the thrust of the non-Brahmin movement.

† B.R. Ambedkar, 'Evidence before the Southborough Commission', *BAWS*, Vol. 1, pp. 248–9.

caste-consciousness would be the chief guide of activity .... From the point of view of communication, the Hindus, in spite of castes, divide themselves into two groups—the touchables and the untouchables. The touchables have enough communication between them to enable us to say that the conflict of like-mindedness so far as they are concerned is not much to be dreaded. But there is a real difference and consequent conflict between the like-mindedness of the touchables and the untouchables. Untouchability is the strongest ban on the endosmosis between them.*

'Untouchables' are placed outside the pale of Hinduism as 'Others'. In suppressing them, Hinduism consolidates itself. This is what we increasingly witness as history closes in on us. Hindus have always isolated Buddhists, Jains, 'untouchables', and other religious minorities, and treated them as 'Others'. We have also been witnessing an increase in this violence against the 'Others'. Unless a qualitative change takes place among the Hindus, there cannot be a quantitative change in the violence they perpetrate. Let us now identify this qualitative change.

Prior to Independence, the British occupied the position of a third party, distinct from both 'touchables' and 'non-touchables'. Once the British left India, there was a vacuum in this third space. Because the parliamentary form of democracy introduced in India espoused political rule by the majority it became easy for the Hindus, who were in a majority in the society, to exercise political majority. Very soon, this religious majoritarianism led to the emergence of a caste majority. Political power has today come to be wielded by those caste groups that are numerically strong.

Since Brahmins have been a minority in society, their violence has mostly been symbolic, whereas the violence unleashed by the castes that are in a numerical majority is physical in nature. Earlier, the authority to decide whether a king can be bestowed with recognition and legitimacy was vested with the Brahmins. The dilemma faced by Sivaji, the Maratha ruler, in the face of such Brahminic authority is recent in our collective memory. Today, the Brahmins wield no such authority. In fact, the power to curb and neuter the symbolic authority of the Brahmins is today wielded by the non-Brahmin castes. The authority that has been concentrated in the hands of the numerically strong castes leads to their power being unlimited in scope.

During the British period, the right to exercise electoral franchise was given only to those who had education and property. As a result,

* Ambedkar, 'Evidence', pp. 249–50.

the 'untouchables' could not get a share in political power, and even other non-Dalit castes could wield only limited political power. Only after universal adult franchise was introduced did this situation change. Ambedkar says:

> In India, the majority is not a political majority. In India the majority is born; it is not made. That is the difference between a communal majority and a political majority. A political majority is not a fixed or a permanent majority. It is a majority which is always made, unmade and remade. A communal majority is permanent majority fixed in its attitude. One can destroy it, but one cannot transform it.*

The parliamentary democracy we have today has not only paved the way for the dominance of a communal majority, but has also facilitated a caste majority. The checks that Ambedkar sought to introduce against the emergence of such a situation were rejected in the Constituent Assembly.† Other than procuring a few concessions for the Dalits, Ambedkar could not do much.

Non-Brahmin Ascendance in Tamil Nadu

The first strong voice raised in favour of a caste majority came from Tamil Nadu. Since 'enlightenment' about this issue dawned here rather early, courtesy of the non-Brahmin movement, the concept of a caste majority also unfolded sooner in Tamil Nadu than in other parts of India. The intensity and scope of the violence perpetrated on the Dalits of Tamil Nadu in the last fifty years is an indicator of this 'non-Brahmin enlightenment'.

The formation of the South India Welfare Association in 1906 and the launch of the 'Non-Brahmin Manifesto' in 1916 in Madras are significant moments in Tamil Nadu's recent political history.‡

* B.R. Ambedkar, 'Communal Deadlock and a Way to Solve It', *BAWS*, Vol. 1, p. 377.

† Ambedkar elaborated his thesis with reference to the Central Assembly that was functional then. In this, he said the Hindus who comprised 54.68 per cent of the population must have only 40 per cent representation, the Muslims who were 28.5 per cent should have a representation of 32 per cent; the Scheduled Castes who formed 28.5 per cent of the population must have 32 per cent; Christians who were 1.16 per cent should have 3 per cent; and the Sikhs who were 1.49 per cent should have a 4 per cent representation. See, 'Communal Deadlock', Vol. 1, p. 369.

‡ For sympathetic histories of the non-Brahmin movement, see V. Geetha and

Following these events, the virtual category of the 'non-Brahmin' was constructed. The Justice Party, launched in 1917, formed the first non-Brahmin-led ministry in the 1920 provincial legislative council election. When the British administration introduced dyarchy in pursuance of the Government of India Act of 1919, the Brahmin-dominated Indian National Congress boycotted the elections in protest. The Justice Party, accepting the scheme of dyarchy, contested the elections, won without facing any resistance, and formed the ministry of the former composite Madras Presidency in December 1920. The Justice Party ministry issued the Communal GO reserving jobs for various non-Brahmin communities in 1921.

However, the Justice Party ministry's idea of non-Brahmin welfare did not include all non-Brahmin castes. This category practically excluded Dalits and other religious minorities. Even among non-Dalit non-Brahmins, only the minority, high non-Brahmin castes—Reddiars, Naickers, Mudaliars, Vellalars, Chettiars—benefited. The composition of the first Justice Party ministry in 1920 reflected this social reality.* Consequently, communities that had numerical strength and yet could not get a taste of the political pie began to stake their claims. The political mobilization of Vanniyars must be understood in this context.† S.A. Nanjappan, who in 1935 spoke on the legislative council budget

S.V. Rajadurai, *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium: From Iyothee Thass to Periyar* (Calcutta: Samya, 1998) and E.Sa. Visswanathan, *The Political Career of E.V. Ramasami Naicker: A Study in the Politics of Tamil Nadu, 1920–1949* (Madras: Ravi and Vasanth Publishers, 1983).

* Though the non-Brahmin movement's primary demand was proportional representation to non-Brahmins in ministries and government jobs, the category of the 'non-Brahmin' excluded the Dalits, designated then as Depressed Classes (Adi-Dravidars). The tables provided in E.Sa. Viswanathan's book are proof of the glaring under-representation of the Dalits. In the three legislative councils between 1920 and 1926, the non-Brahmins constituted 57 per cent of the councils. While in the 1920 council comprising 98 members, 57 non-Brahmins were elected against 17 Brahmins, there was not one elected member from the Depressed Classes. The non-election of the Depressed Classes continued till 1926, the little representation they had coming only through nominations and ex-officio memberships. The trend was the same even in elections to district boards and municipal councils. In 1922, while 486 non-Brahmin and 132 Brahmins were elected to district boards, only one Dalit was elected; in 1927, the non-Brahmins improved their tally to 545, the number of Brahmins came down to 78, but the Dalits had only two elected members. See Viswanathan, *E.V. Ramasami Naicker*, pp. 124–5.

† For an account of the rise of the backward classes in Tamil Nadu, see P. Radhakrishnan, 'Backward Caste Movements in Tamil Nadu', in M.N. Srinivas

motion, said that despite Vanniyars constituting a population of more than 30 lakhs, they did not get a proportionate share in government jobs.* The Vanniyakula Kshatriya Mahasangam, established in 1888, presented a petition to the chief minister in 1938 on this issue.

Such being the ferment among the lower-order non-Brahmin castes, the plight of the Dalits was worse. In 1923, led by one of the foremost leaders of Dalits, M.C. Rajah, a delegation of Dalit representatives met the governor and submitted a petition on the injustice done to the Depressed Classes by the Justice Party ministry. Demanding 30 per cent reservation in government jobs and arguing that Dalit representation in elected bodies should not be based solely on winning elections, the delegation demanded a separate department to attend to the welfare of Dalits.

After Independence, the struggle by the backward castes for reservation in the legislature and judiciary intensified. This was one of the factors that led to the rise to power of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in 1967, the first post-Independence non-Congress government in Tamil Nadu. With the non-representation of classes designated as 'most backward' in DMK-led regimes, one saw the alignment of the Thevars with the M.G. Ramchandran-led All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) since 1972. That a numerically strong caste could emerge as a political force in the electoral arena was first proven in Tamil Nadu politics by the Vanniyars. Disgruntled with the treatment meted out to Vanniyars by the Congress, Vanniyar leaders S.S. Ramaswamy Padayatchi and M.A. Manickavelu Nayakar broke away from the parent party and launched political outfits of their own in 1951—the Tamil Nadu Toilers Party and Commonweal Party, respectively.† Such was the electoral impact created by the Vanniyars under these two leaders that the Congress in 1952, unable to muster a simple majority in the

(ed.), *Caste: Its Twentieth-Century Avatar* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1996), pp. 110–34. In this essay, I draw substantively from the trajectory charted by Radhakrishnan.

* Nanjappan is quoted by Radhakrishnan as saying that the Vanniyars constitute 6.3 per cent of the population of Madras Presidency. Later in his essay Radhakrishnan says, 'Vanniyars account for 12 per cent of the state's population' (p. 125). The incomplete 1931 Census being the only source of data for the share in the population of various castes, latest empirical data on the strength of non-Dalit castes is only a matter of projections. The Thevars, concentrated in southern districts, claim to constitute 6 per cent of the overall state population.

† Prior to that the two leaders put up Vanniyar candidates as independents in the 1949 elections to the district board in South Arcot district, winning 22 of 52 seats defeating many Congress candidates.

provincial council, sought out these two leaders who controlled twenty-five councillors. The two Vanniyar leaders merged their parties with the Congress.* The struggle of the Vanniyars, which scaled down between 1952 and 1967, regained momentum and peaked in 1987.† As a result, the government was forced to create a category called 'Most Backward Classes' (MBC) within the Backward Classes (BC) list. The Thevars became the unintended beneficiaries of this move when they too were designated MBC.

Owing to the struggle of the Vanniyars and the reservation gains made by the MBCs, the BCs, who were already in a powerful position, received a shot in the arm, thanks to the implementation of the Mandal Commission report in 1990. The overall non-Brahmin non-Dalit bloc became even more powerful. This completes the picture of accumulation of power in the hands of the caste majority. This must be seen within the broader context of the developments that took place in the 1990s at the national level. The rise of caste- and religion-based majorities during the post-Mandal agitations and the conflicts of interest among them threatened to upset the established varna order. Very soon the conflicting classes compromised, merged, and gave birth to a militant Hindutva by constructing the Muslims as a common 'Other'. This may seem to be a new phenomenon. But Tamil Nadu had already witnessed a similar and violent past during the Chola period, during which the religious and caste majorities aligned with the state power by constructing the Buddhists and Jains as the 'Other'. Though the 'untouchables' had numerical strength, they were deprived of political and economic power; they were shut out due to the fusing of religious and caste powers which gained state patronage ... something that never happened anywhere else in India. A close look at this hidden history will help us understand the unique nature of the social and cultural position of Dalits in Tamil Nadu. It is in this context that Iyothee Thass's interpretation of the

* The Vanniyar demonstrated their political muscle but successive Congress government bypassed their community's demand for reservation in jobs and the legislature.

† The Vanniyar Sangam was constituted in 1980 and evolved into the Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK) under the leadership of S. Ramadoss, a medical doctor. Today, the PMK wields tremendous influence in the Vanniyar belt—the northern districts of the state. In 1987, they staged a week-long roadblock demanding 20 per cent reservation. During this struggle they torched more than a thousand Dalit homes. The agitation and its sucuess led to the political consolidation of the Vanniyars.

literary history and the religious and cultural practices of Tamils from a Buddhist perspective gains importance.

We normally view 'Dalit literature' as having originated in Marathi in the 1970s. But there is an active century-old distinct Dalit history and culture in Tamil Nadu. Following Iyothee Thass, one may now see the possibility of tracing the antiquity of Dalit literature by reclaiming Tiruvalluvar as a Buddhist. Since the non-Hindu and anti-discriminatory contents of present-day Dalit literature show certain parallels with the contents of early secular Tamil literature, we cannot dismiss this interpretation merely as an imaginary claim of Iyothee Thass.

However, it would be wrong to argue that the possible antiquity of Dalit literature validates the prevalence of caste discrimination in early Tamil history. The Buddhist leanings of early Tamil literature and the interpretation of 'Dravidians' as 'casteless Tamils', merely point to the prevalence of inequality within persons of the same religion and the protest against such a discrimination. It is important to note that this discrimination was quite different from the hierarchical varna system and its mode of operation. Such a reading helps us understand that discrimination against Buddhism seemed to be the basis for the latter forms of discrimination in the name of 'untouchability'. This is what we get from Iyothee Thass's reading of Tamil literature and culture and this helps us move away from the general understanding of Dalit literature as a post-Marathi phenomenon. Following a different route and inspired by the Tamil Buddhist scholar, Lakshmi Narasu, Ambedkar arrives at this same conclusion.

If the 1980s saw the rise of small-scale Dalit movements, state patronage for the Ambedkar centenary celebrations in the 1990s led to the consolidation of these forces and created a space for their cultural expression. It is also important to see the reception accorded to such literary expressions. Those who showed interest in Dalit literature in Tamil Nadu tended to have a Marxist background. They tried to establish a strong link between Dalit literature and the literatures of resistance from other cultures, such as African, Afro-American, Latin American, and even feminist literatures. But they fail to identify the unique features of Tamil Dalit literature in the light of the Buddhist past, which forms the basis of the Dalit question in Tamil Nadu. While Marxists reduced the interpretation of Dalit literature to an expression of class oppression, Periyarists saw Dalit literature as a branch of non-Brahmin literature. Those who felt disturbed by the Dalit critique of other backward castes

started feeling alienated from Dalit literature. They saw Dalit literature as a reaction against the non-Brahmin, non-Dalit castes.

Unable to understand this, literary critics began suspecting Dalit literature of having a secret pact with Brahmins. This has led to the following two stereotypes: (a) literature foregrounds the voice of victims, and (b) caste is substituted with class. These stereotypes caused great damage to Dalit literature. It was in that context that the publication of Iyothee Thass's writings by Dalit Sahitya Academy and by the Folklore Research Centre, Palayankottai, became a major intervention in the political and intellectual spheres, respectively.

Though there are anti-Brahmin overtones, Iyothee Thass's, writings kept a distance from the popular non-Brahmin critique. His anti-Brahminism predates Periyar. His insistence on the need to distinguish between the real Brahmin (the Buddhist) and the pseudo-Brahmin (those who call themselves 'Brahmins') posed a challenge to the simplistic understanding of non-Brahmins. Unlike the anti-Brahminism of non-Brahmins which is firmly located within Hinduism, his anti-Brahmin critique is rooted within the history of a 'Tamil Buddhism'. If there are similarities between the non-Brahmins and Dalits, there are also significant differences. This is the hallmark of Tamil Dalit literature seen in as early a work as Poomani's novel, *Piragu* (1979). Another important aspect is that unlike non-Brahmin literature, right from the beginning Dalit literature was able to address the differences in terms of gender as seen in novels of Imayam and Sivakami. The inter-caste differences among Dalits also occupied a significant place as we could see in Bama's *Vanmam* (2002).

But recent Tamil Dalit literature foregrounds their cultural practices and gives shape to their desires, anguish, and aspirations. This could be found in the stories of Cho. Dharuman, Sudhakar Khathak, J.B. Sanakya, and Thenmozhi, and in the poetry of N.D. Raj Kumar, Sukirtharani, and Ravikumar. Such a body of literature, while identifying itself within Dalit literature by their use of images and vocabulary, goes beyond the discourse of victimization. It is in this way that Tamil Dalit literature has maintained its difference from the Dalit writings of other parts of India. As it distanced itself from the trend of producing autobiographies, it simultaneously moved in the direction of creative literature. This has enriched the content as well as form of Dalit writing in general. Even those who write within a rigid framework of 'Dalit identity politics' have shown a change in their style and approach. Besides creating a space for the circulation of literature of marginal communities of other

cultures, especially that of women, this has made a significant impact on mainstream literature as well.

Contrary to the view that Tamil Dalit literature has reached a state of stagnation, we may now understand that it travels in a different direction. It marches towards the cultural history of Tamils with the strength gained from archival and archaeological sources. Our anthology focuses on this diversity and complexity arising from the Dalit question in Tamil Nadu.

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RAVIKUMAR

POETRY

The selection of Dalit Tamil poetry presented here simultaneously affirms and interrogates the Dalit identity. The poets choose to foreground their individual voices rather than toe a generic line, thereby forging a tenuous but recognizable link with contemporary poetry. The oral tradition of poetry is acknowledged by these poets, but it is not valorized; instead, we see a sort of synergy, a fruitful dialogue between the spoken voice and the written voice. Inspired by the activities of the Dalit social movements in the 1990s, Dalit Tamil poetry has moved rapidly towards subverting, even dismantling, the literary experiments that had been the hallmark of mainstream magazines.

Moving beyond the attempts at 'capturing the reality' of Dalit life, these poems relentlessly test the capacity of the language to convey the totality of Dalit experience, of living in the shadow of potential caste-based violence. They do so by invoking compelling new images, harnessing the speech, idiom, and lore of the people, which had hitherto remained unexplored. The poetry of Mathivannan, Yazhan Aathi, and P. Mathiyalagan, among others, exemplifies this trend.

Dalit poetry has sometimes been critiqued as relying almost exclusively on harsh and even abusive language to convey its message. The poetry of N.D. Rajkumar, a selection of which appears here, challenges this perception. For him, poetry is the art of challenging the boundaries of language without being limited by those of ideology. On the other hand, Ravikumar uses poetry as a vehicle to transport the reader, through the unfamiliar paths of poetic imagination and syntax to the familiar world of experienced reality. Through their poetry, women poets like S. Sukirtharani, Ku. Umadevi, and S. Thenmozhi rewrite the discourse of feminism by re-situating the body politic within the nexus between caste and gender. The corpus of Dalit Tamil poetry with all its diversity opens up a space for continuous self-discovery and transformation. It defies categorization, canonization, and theorization, and blurs the boundaries between perceived 'Dalit experience' and the human condition.

The Full Moon Will Shine in Village after Village*

Prathiba Jeyachandran

The gruel you were fed
And the moon you were shown
Live on beyond memories.

Though living at the mercy of others,
when Appa was touched to the quick
like the sting of a thorn bush,
the cane lashes that rained on the palm.

The moon cannot resist the water's touch.

Pain rises, fingers refuse
to play marbles.

Allolapperi

As the late night moon looked on,
returning from a late night movie.
Taking a short cut to ease the walk
leaping over the compound walls.
The scared bleat of the sheep in the Thevar House
cut short by the strangled throat.
Daybreak saw the moon suffused with light.

Mudugan Kulam

Snapping the pictures of sister's friends
on Agfa III camera,
among the cactus plants.
Getting into a mess
with the villagers chasing.
Hiding in the ragi growth

* Original title *Oor Oorai Nilavu Varum.*

while the full moon in bloom
showed the way with a thorny light.

Tulukkan Kulam

The doorway on the upper street
that opened to a knock with lust and cash.
The Paraiah Periyasami,
who captured and confined the cremation ground ghouls
in pots of fresh clay,
was struck by a ghost and killed there
with the moon as the witness.

Mallaankinaru

Seeni from the Moopanar House
who wet his hands
in the molten jaggery
poured over the crushed chickpeas
on the draw-stone of the well
in the cucumber field.
When his bums blushed with
the tamarind twig lashes,
a moon broke into laughter.

Palavanatham

The night when I went looking for
my college mate
and fell into the hands of the old woman
waiting in the veranda.
On the sky that chased me non-stop
a moon that raced with me alongside.

Manthiriyodai

Bhagyalaxmi from the upper-caste house
drawn to me by the language of the eyes.
Her lips had a fruity scent
that came so close and pulled away so quick.

A full moon that turned bitter in the mouth.

Mudiyanur

The toiling low-caste no-good youngsters
dare ask for a better wage.
The hand that guarded the crops and demanded the wage
is burnt in the scream of the fire.
hiding in the bushes fearing for life.
It was on a moonlit night.

Pacheri

The gruel you were fed
and the moon you were shown
Live on beyond memories.

—*Translated by Ravi Shanker*

Dream-teller*

Prathiba Jeyachandran

Words fondly lie side by side
pressing bodies and fingers rubbing
to seek out the blaze of light.

Mind enjoys the pleasant lightness
on gathering and stringing together
the seldom supple flashes of lightning.

Eyes have something to disclose everyday.

Dreams found in forests
are full of knots and thorns.

The footprints of the ones
seeking dreams in the skies
lie embedded there.

Yet, some space waits there to welcome us,
where we can catch our breath and rest
if one has the will to accept.

* Original title *Kanavukal Solpavan.*

The songs for the *ragas* yet to be composed
lie submerged there
in dreamy mist.

Each second passes
in waiting for the smiling face
that scatters simmering pearls.

Eyes stay parted in the dreams.

—Translated by Ravi Shanker

In the Middle of Town*

Mathivannan

Beaten up
in the street in the middle of town
pouring drink into himself, to drown
the pain inside and outside—
father's drunken wail
laid bare the agony of ages,
while behind
these useless hands, this face,
my inmost being
choked as though in swirls of smoke.

And this:
a child's eyes blossoming
enchanted by his fond
riddle-ridden babble,
and going near—
like a ringing slap across the cheek
that reek
rearing up from the shit-pail
that grandfather hauled.

And stumbling away
with jumbled senses trembling with the shock

* Original title *Oor Theru Naduvil.*

of a sudden
revelation—

Would you know this?
You, who claim so boldly
your right to write
about me?
You, who slap shoulder and thigh
so boastfully!

If you can't come up with any reply
run far, far away
with all of it
stuffed up inside.

—Translated by Vasantha Surya

What is Possible*

Mathivannan

Though
everything is possible
I'm not going to do
anything.

Except this:

This mask of disgrace
that's locked on me
to show that I am 'low' and you are 'high'—
this superior face
that you are wearing—
these masks
I'll go on tearing.

—Translated by Vasantha Surya

* Original title *Saathiyam.*

Strokes of Gentle Sympathy*

Mathivannan

This status of yours
which you've won with your words
is not for dealing out
strokes of gentle sympathy.

Words
are capital that you expend
most prudently, for
it's on your word
that your very status
depends.

The unquestioning nodding of many heads
has led you thus far, where you've won
this status of yours.
And I am left
just with your words,
bereft.

That your status entitles you to
wealth,
plenty of food,
authority, fame
is a string of words
smooth and painless as water
that you've been swinging me on,
flinging me into
a long,
bedrugged
daze.

From this fluid rope of your words,
from your shining eyes
brimming with tenderness

* Original title *Varudi Koduppathaano.*

tell me, what other way is left
to free myself, except

to wring your neck, to choke
that throat of yours, which spoke
those words,
which come so loaded
with concern
for me?

—Translated by Vasantha Surya

Wall-posters*

Indran

Only our vision
we possess.

Drinking in wall-posters,
we walk.

Now and then,
we read them too,
letter by letter.

In the scorching heat
we run, chasing
the mirage-like images
coming in waves on the tarred road.

Here
satans have wings of angels,
tigers eat grass,
owls coo like koels.

Film stars romance
right on the street.

* Original title *Suvarottigal.*

Noble words
float
on the streams of wall-posters.

We walk,
chewing and swallowing the words,
hands always folded humbly.

Now and then,
however,
on the wall-posters
we urinate too.

What to do?

—Translated by Subashree Krishnaswamy

The City of Burning Slums*

Indran

Often,
my city of slums
goes up in flames
from my very gut.

As the night breaks in,
ambling like a patient,
the slums transform into mounds of ash
where streetdogs urinate.

From the shadows
and half-burnt bodies
of those who have nothing to give
but life,
the wind looks
for secrets
behind all the closed gates.

The press,
sleepy-eyed,

* Original title *Erium Serigalin Nagaram.*

prints right through the night
the news of death
for those waiting the next morning
with hot-hot coffee.

Blowing again and again,
the wind keeps alive
the burning embers of the slum,
drenched by the waters of the fire service.

Till
the slum-dwellers themselves
rise up in flames.

—Translated by Subashree Krishnaswamy

River*

Indran

Cooum too is a river.

The great confluence
of sewage drains.

A water colour sketched by the city itself
with splashes of paint.

In summer too
it never did show its sands.

A perennial river—
moves majestically,
safeguarding the everyday secrets of the huts
spread over it.

On this riverbank
the civilization of the marginalized
takes seed.

* Original title *Nadhi.*

In the scorching summer,
when its cool fingers,
filled with stench,
wiped my sweat,
its compassion
I sensed.

—Translated by Subashree Krishnaswamy

The Strategy of Pawns*

P. Mathiyalagan

The moment truth is sought
its shadow appears real.
In a ceaseless rhythm
of changing hues
illusion takes shape.

Embedded in the brain,
piercing through it
a 'Triangle of Knowledge'
based on two angles
can be seen with another
always reaching between
to get to the summit.

Guarding the breach
Between 'Two' and 'Three'
is what makes that 'One'
unique.

If they came together to make
a point
the tyranny of 'One'
would go out of
joint.

* Original title *Vyugam Kollum Kaaigal.*

When will the triangle
become a circle,
and all be
equal?

When pawns know
it's a shadow
that rides on their shoulders,
when they assert themselves
moving in unison
in strategic
formation
towards
what
can
be.

For bearers
to topple a palanquin,
to hurl and smash it and stand
upright,
the time is close
at hand.

—Translated by Vasantha Surya

Manhunt*

P. Mathiyalagan

A time when fear
ate into the flesh.
Noon.
When returning from the hunt
the clang of Madurai-Veeran's chain
rang tearing into the ears.
And even at midnight

* Original title *Vettai.*

dust stung the eyes,
bored into the nostrils.

Waking in a sweat,
eyes shaking off sleep
I crept out.
The sight awaiting me
was of no hero's steed
stamping its hooves, neighing,
flecked with froth.
Instead, beside a pile of rocks
wrapped in scarves of blood,
lay two heads,
eyes bulging from sockets,
scalps sliced off
like tops of palm-nuts.

Raw blood's heart-stopping reek
barred the way.

One had gone too close
to the landlord's daughter.
The second was a friend
who chose
to be their love's
supporter.

'Watch where you dare
to plant yourself!
Wrench off that itch
before it puts out
a sprout!'

The baying of hounds
melted away.
Hoof-sounds grew faint.

Anguished whimpers
burst into sobs,
that rammed into the sky
and shattered.

Upraised staves
clashed

with hurled knives.
Seeds were sown
for another manhunt.

—Translated by Vasantha Surya

My Son Wants Me to Buy Him a Toy Car*

N.D. Rajkumar

My son wants me to buy him a toy car
It's shut inside a glass case; so I give him
a play cart fashioned from palm fruit and twigs.
He wants me to buy him a snare drum,
which nestles inside
a refrigerated glass case;
so I make him a drum with snakeskin.
He wants me to buy him a dog figurine;
I fetch him a pup instead from
a thicket inside the compost pit.
Tail wagging, it follows him gleefully,
besides teaching him how to pick up a scent.

You, My Demon Who Delights in Dancing*

N.D. Rajkumar

You, my demon who delights in dancing
on the wound-bearing tree, from which
childless fairies hang upside down, rejoicing—
You, who strode in here bearing your sword
and the lustre of your might, entered

* In the originals, these poems do not have titles.

these demons, broke them with your frenetic
dancing and thereby came to your senses—
thrash them now and bring back our fragrant
medicinal herb which they had stolen from us.
Look, it's heading this way, that holy cow
they've sent here to knock us down.
Here, lay it down in the central bay
of our house, tear open its belly, pull out
its entrails, and place them in a row
of small heaps. O the mother-goddess
of my malankaadu: I, ruler of this jungle, am here.
Lay out the votive feast of meat today for our
primal gods, incarnated in these totemic stones

One Day Long Ago, When the Dying Howl*

N.D. Rajkumar

One day long ago, when the dying howl
of the still living frog as it impaled itself
to death on the sharp point of your sabre
descended on you as a terrible curse,
you were excluded hence
from our customs and rituals.
At midnight, when our shadows
did not fall to earth,
we danced in celebration
with the moon and the night.
These ailments returned
somehow to infect us later.
The spirit of the graveyard is dancing,
the evil spirit of disease is writhing in pain, and
the ogress is leaping high.
Karumba, Kurmba—
Your sword and shield are

* In the original, this poem does not have a title.

so right for this task:
pick up all the scriptural idols
who have trespassed sneakily
into our midst, tie them up
in a sack, carry them out and
dump them in the shit-house—
beat that drum again.
Beat, beat it
again and again.

If Anyone Other than Our Own People*

N.D. Rajkumar

If anyone other than our own people
should happen to read this palm leaf manuscript,
they will feel giddy, their hearts will pound,
and the heat within will dim their sight,
addle their brains, and
enfeeble all their learning—
so have I now, in my writings,
set evil spirits to cause these afflictions.

—Translated by N. Kalyan Raman

Pond, Where ...†

Ravikumar

A wilderness of reeds
grows along the bank.
Waterweeds
dense and rank
float arm in arm, like half-hidden

* In the original, this poem does not have a title.
† Original title *Kaadaaga Sambu.*

crocodiles.
In between,
the water smiles.

Left to soak, bamboo poles
sprout green shoots.
At water's edge a kingfisher eyes
its prey.

Sometimes big murrel fish
dash against our calves,
leap up and fall back
with a plop.

At daybreak and nightfall,
Sivan's temple spires
admire themselves
in the village pond,

where you can
wash your cattle
rinse your shit-rags
clean your arse

where we alone
may not fetch
water.

—Translated by Vasantha Surya

You, Friend of My Childhood*

Ravikumar

You're wondering why
I ask about
your childhood.

Images imprinted
at a tender age

* Original title *Un Sirupiraayam Kuritthu.*

are without taint.
When you speak of them
you become a child, and
I love it.

You grew up
surrounded by goddesses,
touched by not a speck of dust,
your very dreams protected
by divine beings.
When you share
that childhood of yours
I become a child again
with you.

Don't say
I'm not from your street,
not from your village,
don't
push me
away.

Ponds there are
in my village, too,
where even in summer
fishes leap.
Wickernets, and bamboo traps—
we, too,
have those.

Our people know
how to slice and sun-dry the fish
we can't finish.
Our people know
how to make a whole street
smell good.

Of nicknames people lug around
we have no famine, too.
'Bigbelly', 'Windblown', 'Dummy'.
'That fellow from up North!'—
That's what we call
anyone who doesn't belong.

Where fragrant screwpine reeds
lean against the canal slope
at our bathing ghat,
is a black rock
rubbed yellow with holy root of turmeric
omen of home
to bear witness
as we slip off our clothes
without letting them
touch the water,
pile them on our heads,
and wade across
to a pool between the fields
thick with a tangle of lilies that I'll pick
for you.
Come.

—*Translated by Vasantha Surya*

Have You Heard the Rain Crying?*

Ravikumar

Have you heard the rain crying?
Does its sobbing
saw away
at your chest?

When the wailing wind
beseeches you
like a woman everyone has abandoned,
who's left without a helping hand
who keeps running to one after another
to tell her side of the story, and get
the justice that's her due?

Have you never heard
a head being banged on the ground

* Original title *Mazhai.*

as it damns the four directions?
When children beg, hands outspread,
you've passed them by.
And so
it's turned stone-dead,
that heart of yours.
Yet—just try—
to see!
For what the ears have missed
the eyes can hear,
sometimes.

—*Translated by Vasantha Surya*

Rickshaw-pedalling for Fifteen Years*

Kapilan

Brother, I am pedalling this rickshaw for fifteen years.
Two girls, one boy.
The elder and the younger have the same husband.
The son sometimes pedals this rickshaw.
Doesn't give anything at home.
My wife sells brooms.
The house rent is hundred and fifty rupees.
I make some money only from school trips.
Now, that too is dried up because it's two months vacation.
If I had studied a bit
why would I pedal this rickshaw
in this boiling sun?

—*Translated by Ravi Shanker*

* Original title *Pulappada Nagaram.*

If I Go as Helper in a Construction Job*

Kabilan

If I go as helper in a construction job,
he says I am the *keep* of maistri
If I sell flower at the theatre entrance
he says I am the *keep* of the policemen.
If I comb my hair,
he wonders whom I am seducing with so much make up.
If I watch TV at the neighbour's house
he wonders who I have been sleeping with.
If my man was doing good, why would I send my adolescent girl
to peddle idlis?

—*Translated by Ravi Shanker*

Born to Who-knows!*

Kabilan

Born to who-knows!
Doesn't go to class but loafs around and goes to school to eat
He is yet to grow hair on his face
he smokes beedi stubs already.
He behaves as if he is keeping a woman
Go to school regularly, or—
I'll tell the teacher to thrash you
For your father, life itself is drink
Should you be the same so soon?

—*Translated by Ravi Shanker*

* Original titles *Pulappada Nagaram.*

Clutching the End of My Saree*

A. Vincent Raj

My children
follow me around
in dismay and distress
clutching at the end of my saree.

A drop of blood
on the hero stone.
A lemon impaled on the lance.
Veeranar, with his thick menacing moustache.

'Slut! Hot as ever, aren't you?'
The taunts of the police
I feel I'm dead.

'Ayya … please don't flog … it hurts!'
The air is thick
with the scales of a splintering scream.

Flailing in the wind and
Rolling about in the soil
Struggling to get away
from the blows—

'Be off! Get lost!'
A single blank sheet.
A single signature.

Gone—you've gone
Beyond pain.
Beyond bruises
Beyond life.

A touch of grey—on Veeranar's ferocious moustache.
A touch of rust—on his lance.

My children follow me around.

—*Translated by Ravi Shanker*

* Original title *Pudavai Nuni Pidithu.*

A Lesson in Action and Reaction*

Thai Kandasamy

Against each blow struck
throbs a frenzied
parai drum.

A splatter of dung
stays stuck
where it's flung.
But a ball will bounce back
from every kick.

Slaps on the rump
can make goats change course.
A bull always rebels.

Primed in flame, a bamboo cane
springs up straight,
sheds its ancient
hunch.

No force of gravity
can quell
flame-tongues rising up
in rebellion.

'Action' and 'reaction'
may go by rules
that science
still cannot explain.

A stiff stance of mere bravado
just will not match
the sheer daring of a rod
that's been bent
many times.

—*Translated by Vasantha Surya*

* Original title *Paadam.*

Conflict in Friendship*

Thai Kandasamy

I am a tender sprout
You are fire
A garden turned to ashes

I am a boat
You are the direction
The journey is lost

I am a lily
You are water
The pond gasped for breath

I am colour
You are the brush
The painting has become deformed

I am the word
You the significance
Senseless became the poem

I am pollen
You the wind
Spring turned barren

I am the sky
You the moon
Brightness has waned

I am the plant
You the earth
Lifeless became the land

I am a man
And you a woman
A bond unsexed

* Original title *Naipu Muran.*

I am the slum
You the city
Dis … tant, gone humanity

—*Translated by Prabha Nair*

A Possibility*

Thai Kandasamy

With a loud crackle
somebody or other
keeps walking over
the shrivelled, tender shoots
of our aspirations
trampling them underfoot.

A deformity that can't be hidden,
this blessed birth
is strewn with the small change
of curses.

This stream thirsts
just to freeze
just to melt
as it may choose.
But many slippers
beg to be worn on our feet,
For our shoulders
several shawls compete.

Now, nothing more can be done
except to turn
these thwarted cravings for real embraces,
these wilting caresses
into acts of attack.

—*Translated by Vasantha Surya*

* Original title *Saathiyam.*

Portrait of My Village*

S. Sukirtharani

How can I bear to see
my dry lands, surrounded by rocks and hills,
rent, as if by an earthquake's fissures?

The thick sulphurous smell
of the fermented gruel
received with palms cupped and raised—
given as wages for grass cut, bundled,
borne by hands abraded by ulundu plants—
still pervades the body, like a ductless gland.

When the single measure of paddy—
flung to us for carrying away and burying
their dead animals—turned to chaff,
the tormenting starvation that followed
still moves in the memory.

Our bare feet are drenched
by the pain of caste that drips from our lips
as we drink tea from palm-leaf cups,
standing at an untouchable distance,
while the portrait of our village
frames itself at a place of double existence,
always vigilant.

—*Translated by Lakshmi Holmström*

* Original title *En Gramatthin Oviyam.*

Debt*

S. Sukirtharani

A piece of hide
sewn into the base of the basket
she sets out.
The blunt-edged, scrap-iron sheet
piled with gathered ashes
is heavy in her arms.

Behind a house that's fit to split
with too many people in it
she goes—stops there,
her eyes falling on a square
iron sheet
swinging from a nail.
Raising it with one hand
she throws a handful of ashes
inside.

And then,
scraping her forearm on the hole's
jagged edges, she
sweeps and scoops, sweeps and scoops
from left to right
tilting it
into the basket.

And when
it's full, and heavy on her head
with the back of her hand
she wipes away
yellow water
streaming down her brow.

And then,
with easy grace
she goes her way.

* Original title *Kaimaaru.*

What I can do for her
is
not to defecate
once.

—*Translated by Vasantha Surya*

A Faint Smell of Meat*

S. Sukirtharani

In their minds,
I, who smell faintly of meat,
my house where bones hang,
stripped entirely of muscle,
and my street
where youths wander without restraint
making loud music
from coconut shells strung with skin,
are all at the furthest point of our town.
I assure them
we stand at the forefront.

—*Translated by Lakshmi Holmström*

My Body†

S. Sukirtharani

Through a mountain where small shrubs abound
flows a river.
Along its banks, branches of trees
running with sap, bend over,
and touch the water's surface.
The fruit, tasting richly of ginger,

* Original title *Melliya Pulaal Naatram.*
† Original title *Ennudal.*

break open their fine skins,
and put forth their seeds.
Water spills over from the hollows
in the rocks, and cascade from the edges of cliffs.
A tiger, replete from its hunt,
wets its blood-smeared mouth
at the swift water streams.
As it climbs down, scarlet ash scatters
from a volcano's gaping mouth.
A vortex, whirling clockwise,
agitates the earth. The day's heat
dissolves itself into night's coolness,
In the end, Nature becomes my body
lying still.

—*Translated by Lakshmi Holmström*

Nirvana's End*

Ku. Umadevi

From some far corner
of an ancient fig-tree's
beautiful roots
certain sensations
baffle the understanding
sending it into
a dizzy spin,
towards an abrupt end:
the time of the fig's
fatal fruition.

A strange killer-urge
wrestles with
Being
embodied
in rare human form.

* Original title *Buddha Nilai.*

Even as it awakens to the bliss
of the life beyond,
the body struggles
to free itself.

A moment
turns into an aeon
devouring life in monstrous gulps
till its very last breath
takes the form
of a disciple
stammering in terror.

Ascetic
turns mystic
in that half-second.
The All-knowing Guru
enslaves the learner,
injects him with
'*Knowledge*'.

In that split second
Being's
Buddha-state
comes to an end.

—*Translated by Vasantha Surya*

She Who has Absorbed the Ways*

Ku. Umadevi

She comes alive from the ancient cave sculptures
Unequalled
She watches from beyond the street
The desolate forest

Singed by the burden of thirst
Drinking the falling rain as it swelled

* Original title *Thisaigalai Parugiyaval.*

The world to her
Became a cup of tea

Casting aside the copulations
Of a savage life
That sought pleasure in relaxing
On the edge of a well
Surrounded by lush thick grass
Hastily they tear themselves away and stride
The determined princesses

As the flesh entwined swords
Flashed forth in fury
Milk from the long-engorged breasts
Of the forest women
Gushes forth as a waterfall

Though the restless planets
Have welcomed her as the shores
Stretching to relieve the long languor
This cave woman who bathes happily in the waters
Knows the tongue of hunting

—*Translated by Prabha Nair*

Those Who are Protecting this Country*

Ku. Umadevi

To every single person
Who is protecting our country
Sacred
Like our doctrines
Are excrement and water

Flattering
Masses of devotees arms outstretched
For the loin cloth clad mendicants

* Original title *Innattai Iratchithu Kondirukkum.*

Who denude and dress the deities
Supremely important are these consecrated wastes

Apt too for the middle castes
Who cannot tolerate
Our refusal to obey

We who created sandals
Sharper than a needle
As we hone our knowledge into a weapon
You who squirm beneath
The grandly stacked books
Saying thieves do not form a union
And pariahs taboo to schools
Matching caste in caste

When women in hill forests
Abandon arrows and boil milled rice
For both man and beasts
O poor you
You teach even your children
To stir shit
In caste frenzy.

—*Translated by Prabha Nair*

Urn*

S. Thenmozhi

Trembling faintly, she gathers up
the scattered babble,
the toy pots and pans
of childhood.

Groping in that tiny mortar and pestle
looking for the times that once
pounded down on her
she peers at the ground-up batter

* Original title *Thaazhi.*

of memories,
scoops it up
from flat-stone and deep-stone
flips a dosai
of not-quite-done thoughts
on a small griddle.

She scolds the food
for throwing a last-minute tantrum
refusing to be cooked properly,
leans back, legs crossed,
in her armchair.

She asks the wooden *marapaachi* doll
how life has treated her friend
who once didn't even know
how to tie a saree,
whose love affair she helped along,

She looks for a key
to open the treasure-box
where she once saved
small change, and
her own, small
romance.

When her grandson passes by,
book in hand,
she shuts her eyes, as
an old terror
suddenly comes back.

An old familiar voice
falling on her ears,
she looks around
for her thatha
in his old familiar shirt.

Rocked by a lullaby
of memories,
her head nods,
non-stop.

—Translated by Vasantha Surya

Till Just before Committing that Murder*

S. Thenmozhi

A moment before the murder
I had no plan of action
Yes that murder was committed by me
Till just before I did it
The face of the victim
Was new to me
Didn't know his name
His nature, penury, possessions
None of these I knew

Till the moment before the murder
About his relationships
About the little girl catching the air in her hands

As she reached out screaming 'father'
That the sanctum sanctorum would char and crumble
In the tremor of the voice that called out 'Oh my son!'
That the darkness of a heart
I would intensify with loneliness
I did not know

Till the moment before the murder
The potential of the seeds
He had sown in the isolated land
About having written on his broad shoulders
The story of his burden
About having enjoyed the music
Of dried withered leaves rustling
I did not know

Till the moment before the murder
The place it would happen
Could have been unknown to him
That it could have been a place
Where his ancestors lay buried

* Original title *Andha Kolai Seiyum Satru Munbuvarai.*

Or a place where broken love
Might have been announced
It was not known

Till the moment before the murder
That as always with the rise of the sun
He would have stretched himself
That he would have prepared this day
Piling up not just for the day
But for a lifetime as well
Morphine dreams
I did not know

Till the moment before the murder
Though neither his glances, words
Nor were actions reasons
As he was witness to my anger
That he would be killed in a minute
I did not know

Till the moment before the murder
Having cut and trimmed the yellow Cassandra
Watered the *thiruneetru pachai*[*]
Placed a couple of thulasi leaves in the mouth
Having asked for and partaken rice water
Being terrified of the gliding of the skink
None of these can be withheld

Till the moment before the murder
Disarmed, defenceless
The eyes that cry out on seeing blood are mine
The wings of my valor that seek a cave to hide in
Are tender

Just after the murder
That my minutes would be walled
Within structured chequered squares
With a corpselike body and a heart beating within
A witness to the aftermath of a murder
That I would be the sole corner

[*] A plant with leaves like the basil plant (tulsi).

In a prison cell
I did not know

—*Translated by Prabha Nair*

Refusal to Return[*]

S. Thenmozhi

Only to visit Thatha
Does daughter's vacation arrive

The images of circumstances
That rise around me
Knowingly or unknowingly
Like a trigger that eliminates
Keep rejecting her

While my greatest savings
Fail to meet
Her smallest expectations
A broken doll
Fulfils effortlessly

Overriding my proprieties
Juggling the minutes to and fro
She delights in scattering them

As for the days she waits only for puberty
Or ignores utterly the morrows
From me who lives only for the future
In my life's marketplace
Where barter creates history
She changes rancorous feats of the past
Into simple tales at night

From chickens dogs and cats
With the shot of anguish
On being stung by a catfish
She would bring engaging stories

[*] Original title *Thirumba Maruthal.*

Waiting thus with hope
Her dolls as tall as she
And I who fear
She'd have forgotten her lessons
Sleep in the same room

Each time I ask her
To return home
Within her voice that responds
Why don't *you* come here
Lies trapped
A river that tries to elude

In the nothingness of knowledge
Unable to create a child's world
Reaching out to burst the bubble of froth
The sheaths of helplessness
Of the prisoner of perverse situations
Burn furiously

—Translated by Prabha Nair

Missing*

Yazhan Aathi

Do not search in my words
for anything that could give you
a high.

Ash of half-burnt bone
lies strewn about in them.
And smoking ghosts of ancestors
long dead, or gone
missing.

Oozing from my fingers
is blood.
From the slaughter-block

* Original title *En Sorkalil Thedatheer.*

stench of my lines
you'll know it.

This house of mine of mud and slime,
through which
no fine flower-scent has ever wafted—
my father's young brother
Munirathnam's
curses
when he got home
bone-weary
worn-out
dead-drunk—
these are the burdens on the backs
of my herds of words.

Into great, grief-stricken howls
have dissolved
our songs and pictures
never to be found again
The light welling from our lamps
has been stifled
in terrible fires.

The 'dung-milk'*
my forefathers were given to drink
is what I'm vomiting
as poetry.

—Translated by Vasantha Surya

* 'Dung-milk' is a mocking term, referring to a mixture of cowdung and water forced to 'troublemakers'. Given the ideology of caste repression, it is not inconceivable that it was part of the repertoire of actual methods used to keep Dalits down. Certainly the mere threat of administering this repulsive drink has been part of the language and use against them.

Resurrection*

Yazhan Aathi

Amid these heaps of mangled ruins
I'm gathering myself up,
and I'm seething.

Whatever that point was
from which you toppled me
I'm up again, I am
myself again.

When you next turn up
that last scene
which seeped from my eyes
in tears
will be replayed
from
certain memories.

I just might whet
the point of my pen,
or this stick I use
to beat my old leather drum,
or it could be—why not?—
my sword-blade
that I test for sharpness
on you.

—*Translated by Vasantha Surya*

* Original title *Meetturuvaakkam.*

He-goat's Whiskers and Cut-throat Sickle*

Yazhan Aathi

When a high-caste fellow
outraged the honour
of Kathamuthu's young sister—
(if I tell what caste he was—even today they will set our huts on fire)
it seems Grandfather Chinnasami
cut off his prick
in the very shade
of Mariamman's temple spire.

When a starched khaki shirt showed up
to file a complaint,
dared to call out his name
it seems Grandfather Chinnasami
picked up a hotpot of cowmeat curry and flung it
at his too-smart face.

On our festival day, when somebody said
'Keep your filthy pariah temple car
out of our town!'
it seems
our Grandfather Chinnasaami
hit him with a jet of piss
saying
'It's Mariatha's holy water.
Drink up, *da*!'

Lashing out with his stick
it seems Grandfather Chinnasami
caused quite a stir
in the village's orderly rows.
Grandmother Ponniamma
told many such tales.

* Original title *Thathavin Vettarivaalum Kidaameesaiyum.*

over and over
again.

As I walk on and on,
asking,
always asking
for a place to live,
for a place to die,
Grandfather turns up in my dreams, with his
he-goat's whiskers and his cut-throat sickle.

—*Translated by Vasantha Surya*

Sensing the Senses*

Bharathi Nivethan

As one more second ticks by
the breath is about to uproot itself exhaling the last
for the final rest at the end of the calendar
eager to greet with a sprinkle of fertile green
roots that may sprout here from anywhere.

On the vast spaces without a road in sight
in some stone that is melting in bitter grief
reside the beloved mother deities
who can turn dreams into potions
and hand over the tomorrows
and cause to happen the tremendous desire to
ruthlessly drive away the beings that feed on
even what is left on the skeleton.

Tormented by the lawmen's abuses on the highway
and after bouts of sex and drinking sprees in liquor dens
the ones who have lost their navigation maps
trudge ahead tearing a way in the rain.

* Original title *Pulanarithal.*

Once the four borders have been crossed
from their navels will they sprout
young shoots
of their umbilical memories.

Elixir-venom venom-elixir
is not set to speak now.

Only silence is thickly poured by them
layer after layer
upon the whole.

—*Translated by Ravi Shanker*

The Rats Have Guts*

Bharathi Nivethan

The cat's paw that rests silent
on the floor,
freezing the tongue on the paw
in the cold let loose by the rain,
and waiting patiently for what it looks forward to,
can guzzle a whole buckerful of milk.

In that space where
the preys are there
be sure, a cat will be
leaning to one side
and swinging his legs
like a decorated doll.

Where the bund is breached,
if they are unable to catch
the little fish that come out gushing,
the frustrated kitten will scurry away
sketching their faces to plant them in the mud.

* Original title *Elikalin Thunichal.*

An old cat circumambulates the virgin goddesses
and smears himself with saffron and turmeric
and marks his circular bounds
with a squeeze of a split lemon.

Slicing up the meows and
gnawing them fried,
the rats come rushing to hunt
and ripping apart the nets
and pushing aside the chairs that had
taken roots in the soil,
they not only eat
but also shit
and
as a parting shot
mate with a cat
and dash away.

—*Translated by Ravi Shanker*

The Lone Woman's Speech*

Bharathi Nivethan

The fragrance that lingers within, behind closed windows,
has the capacity to be invisible to any discerning eye.

It will gently massage the nape of the intruder
and peck at it in animated thrill
as the fresh scent of the ones just buried
and of the herbal oils that spread and simmer on them.

(crossing the road in the rain
swelling with inner desire
the window with its curtains billowing.)

Gripping the window
and kicking and yanking
to demolish the wall,

* Original title *Evaalin Arikkai.*

the lone woman turns in defeat
in the late hours of the night.

In the proximity of the ones
who slashed their veins
on teacup rims,
in the dark kitchen mires,
in the show houses of the dead,
to cut off what she speaks
chasing sickles follow
howling.

—*Translated by Ravi Shanker*

The Scent of Mother*

Bama

In the calm of the rainstorm
And the fury of the torrent
In the depths of the mind
A new surge of joy
My school-age self
A ten-year-old girl
Skip-skipping homeward
Cool, cool raindrops
Soaking hair, dripping face
A special ecstasy
Bubbling and rising
Clamouring desires resist
Mother's remonstrations
The mind disdains all fetters
And tosses aside each care
Splashing joyously in the rain
Never a tear to cause a stain
The years roll by.

* Original title *Ammavin Vasam.*

In yesterday's rain
I was soaked to the skin
When I entered the house
Came memories of her
And a deep stab of pain
With the edge of her saree
Mother wiping my face
As I sought sweet comfort
In her warm embrace.

Parting my tangled hair
Drying it with care
The joy of seeping warmth
The spreading waves of peace

From her saree an aroma
Of scented sandalwood
The scent of Mother
I remember it well
And can still smell
Its special fragrance
At night while in bed
The softness of its folds
Would caress my face
I would kiss it and kiss it
And drift off to sleep
And all would be bliss.

I am now forty
And mother to two
Yet to this very day
My heart reaches for her
I seek that special fragrance
My yearning undiminished
Her breath has now stilled
Yet her scent lives on
Within me.

—Translated by Malini Seshadri

Christmas at Keelvenmani*

Anonymous

Huddled in corners,
clothed in fetid air they lay,
these beings in bondage
that day.

Earth was a cremation ground
every hill a charnel mound.
Each electric poles and telegraph post
evoked the Cross.
On that unlucky night.
with the bright moon wiped off its brow
the sky was left
bereft as the heart of a widow.

More cruel than Yama on his buffalo
or any other god of death could ever be
the landlords rode into Venmani
on their hoodlum-herds.

Darkness itself grew stealthy feet,
wielded a noose of bicycle chains,
encircled, and throttled
the helpless hamlet of 'God's folk',
Venmani, dear to us
as our very eyes.

Cheris were trampled and ravaged
like fields of crops under wild bison's hooves
sending our folk scattering
like precious grains of rice.

* Original title *Venmani*. This poem was written after the Kilvenmani Massacre of 25 December 1968, in which 44 Dalits (16 women, 6 men, and 22 children) perished, following an agitation by Dalit agricultural workers for an increase of a kilo of paddy in their wages. They were attacked by caste Hindu followers of Gopalkrishna Naidu, a landlord, chased and locked into a hut which was then set on fire.

Like wild things chased and caught in a sack,
they fled into a rundown shack
filled it till they spilled
from its split-open roof.

Dark as night,
that demon-hut gulped down its prey
Doors bared like lips in a gloating grin,
that sinister shape
squatted on its haunches
in a drenching rain
of kerosene.

In that petrol-pond
banked by a wall of human flesh
(the gangs of goons who stood around)
that wretched hut
drowned.

Hurled from all sides,
their fire-sticks spewed sparks
like ghastly imps
cackling and prancing in glee
on the final ember
put in the mouth of the dead.

Hissing and spitting like an angry snake
a blazing streamer of rags
gave the roof a venomous lick.
'HO!'
roared the flames with a hoarse shriek,
seizing the sky by its chin, and whirled around
like spiralling fiery suns.

Human howls rent the earth, and eyes
were steeped in gushing tears
vainly trying to douse
the flames on burning bodies.

How that rain of red fire
came battering down upon us
as a cyclone of crimson blood!

How it danced, like a demon possessed,
in a monstrous trance!

Not Kaliyuga's epochal flood,
no towering wave
of seven converging seas
nor melting ice
of a hundred shattering Himalayan peaks
not even the gathered waters of a thousand Gangas
flowing as one mighty river
through every street in the land
can quench
Venmani's fire.

O my Venmani
this cruel tyranny
has turned you
red as blood.

In India's cheris
where countless lamps thirst for a drop of oil
for how many, how many ages
have the tormented, the tortured
borne the grievous burden of the darkness
reigning over them,
trying to keep alive the bud of dawn
within their hearts.

Pouring their blood like ghee into their lamps,
twisting their bodies into living wicks
they walk the lanes of Venmani,
spreading the light of that great fire
into every part of this land.

For thousands and thousands of years
the outraged sobs
of these beings in bondage
have welled up within them
to burst out
again, and again.

And when their blistering anger
finally forced open their eyes
they saw at last
what their lives had been, they saw
the cause of their own pain.

And then it was
that their foes thrust
fiery torches
like fingers of flame
into those eyes
poking them out.

When will the dawn's mighty conflagration
rise, and illumine all directions?
When will they cease,
these sufferings we've borne
birth after birth?

That fire
which Sivan set alight with his third eye
which Vijayan sent, flame-tipped, from his Gandiva
which Hanuman kindled with his burning tail
was the same raging fire
that Krishna Naidu lit in Venmani.
O my Venmani
this cruel tyranny
has turned you
red as blood.

* * *

That day,
from the bowels of the earth
thousand-headed Adiseshan slithered up to the surface,
sat in Venmani's street, and spread his hood.
Whipping out his fiery tongue, he began
his waving, twisting, deadly dance.
And he dances still, and will dance on.

O Snake charmer!
You who awoke Adiseshan
from his subterranean slumbers!

Blow your flute! Play on!
Until our own Adisesha, of our thousand lamps
rears up, and in one fell swoop
pounces and strikes,
blow on, play on your flute!

O you unlit cheris!
You who depend on the charity of a streetlight
to keep darkness at bay!
Rows of oil-fed earthen lamps, glowing electric bulbs
adorn multistoreyed houses.
But for you
who have turned into pillars of stone
I shall light a lamp.
To clear the haze of delusion!
To make things clear to your minds!
Venmani's lamp
from whose flame you may set alight
the lamps of your own eyes.

This is no tall brass pedestal lamp
ritually kept alight
in a temple's womb-chamber
Nor an earthen lamp's bright flicker
in the dark night of Karthigai,
nor the faint light glimpsed for half a minute
on Ayyappa's famed temple summit.*
Not the crescent moon's glow
beaming Allah's benediction,
nor Jesus' shining halo,
nor Amman's votive lamp
bestowing priceless blessings

* The light described here is the Makara Jyoti, which appears on 14 January every year at Sabrimala, the famed Kerala shrine to Lord Ayyappa. Attracting huge crowds, its divine origin has often been questioned, but it was not until 14 January 2011 stampede claiming 102 lives that it is now established that the Makara Jyoti is the flame of a bonfire on a nearby hilltop. Marketed thus far as a divine spectacle, it now turns out that it has for years been secretly lit by temple authorities together with, local and state, vested interests. The poem dismisses the claim to sacredness of this and other religious and quasi-religious fires, and denounces them as strategies to confound and subdue the oppressed. Instead, the poet exhorts the Dalits to keep alive the fire of Venmani burning in their hearts.

nor a petromax flare
devouring the night.

What lamp is this, then? you ask!
And I shall tell you
what it is not:

Know any lamp that's touted as divine
as false.
Though placed unctuously
at the head of workers' corpses,
know such a lamp for the lie it is,
no symbol of eternal life
but a puny, momentary flicker
of cheap sympathy.

The fire that burns
only in the mansions of the ruling class,
is a treacherous, vainglorious flame,
by whose cunning you have been enticed,
O my ignorant people!
From cradle to cremation ground
your sole means of sustenance
has been
your own hunger.

To clear the haze of delusion
To make things clear to your minds
I shall light a lamp,
Venmani's sacred lamp.
For no hand-held ornamental lamp
no ghee-fed ritual lamp
no tinted lantern with a fine glass jar
no imitation flame
can equal
the golden beacon of truth.

You who are blinded
by the darkness of despair!
I shall squeeze sparks of Venmani's fire
like drops of ghee.
into the lamps of your eyes.

Like deserts whose rivers resemble
marriage threads torn asunder
you of Venmani
have withered under the sun
like widows in white.
I shall send fresh blood
coursing through your arteries
heated by currents of fire
from Venmani's burning lake.

Venmani has smouldered through the ages,
Her screams
have been
swallowed, digested, and assimilated.
Transformed
into great shouting slogans
hurled at the mountains of money
by you, resurgent humanity!

You have forged voices of steel.
Walking with the leaping gait of lightning
you breathe the smoke of volcanoes,
O great army of working class folk!
Mocking, defying the deluge
You take it prisoner!

Seizing it by the scruff of its neck
seating yourself upon Monster-Time
you advance.
Beaming from the inmost space of your heart,
Venmani's unceasing flame
reddens
the windows of your eyes
like ripe *kovai* fruit.

—*Translated by Vasantha Surya*

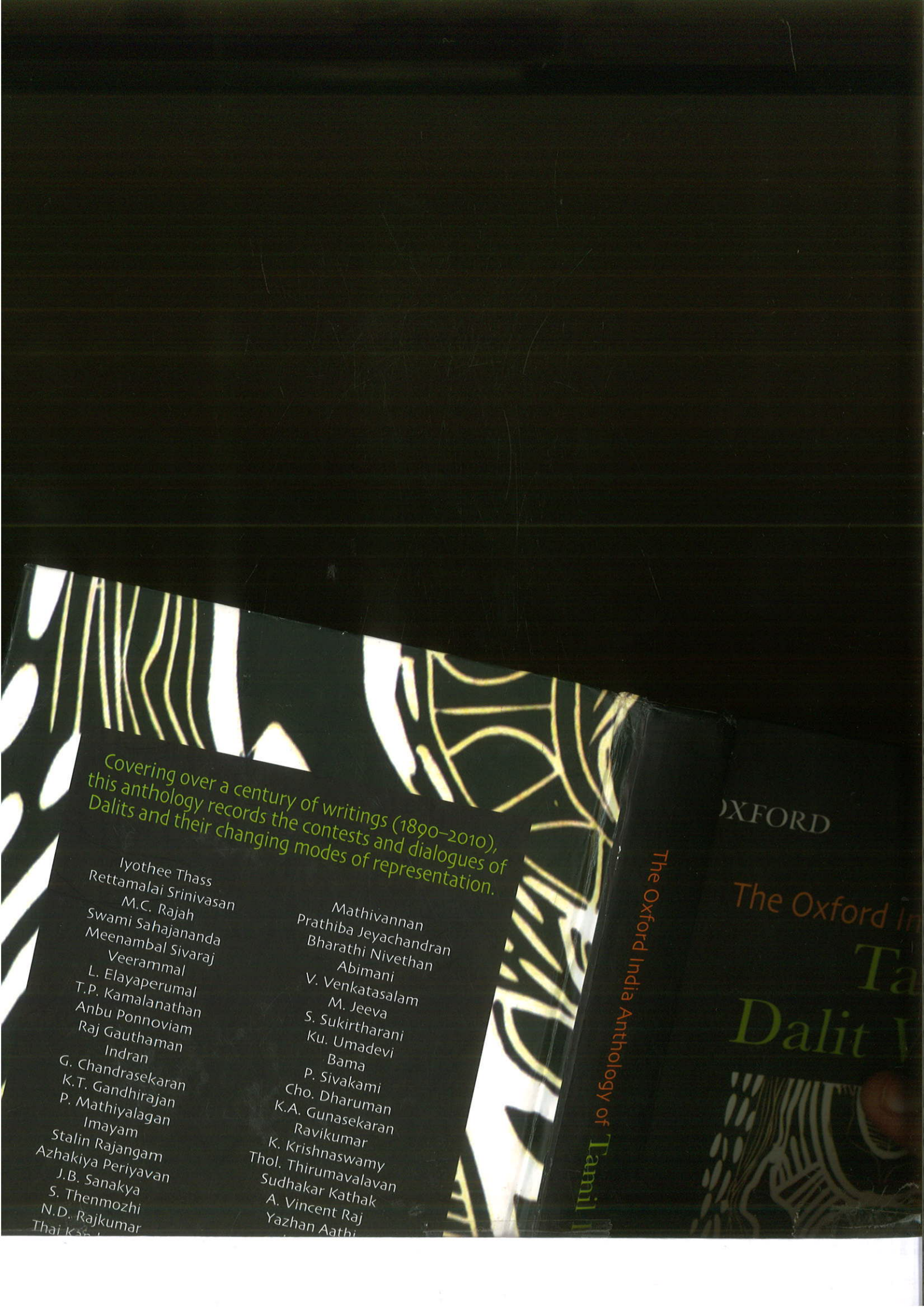
SHORT FICTION

The short story received significant attention in Tamil literary history in the 1960s with the rise of little magazines like *Kanaiyazhi*, *Gnanaratham*, *Deepam*, *Ka Sa Da Tha Pa Ra*, and *Nadai*. For the writers of this period, who followed their predecessors like Pudumai Pithan, the short story became a preferred form of literary expression as it provided the freedom to experiment and the flexibility to accommodate a whole spectrum of styles and themes. By deliberately using literature as a tool for social activism, Dalit writers often embrace the short story as a semi-fictionalized record of events and recollections that amplify the resonance of caste and highlight the responses of Dalits.

The short stories in this section move away from the generic short story as they are written not merely to entertain, nor even to inform, but to demand of the reader a level of engagement to evoke the reader's conscience. The reader is transported to experiences of altered reality. Often this is laced with wrenching emotions and sometimes raw angst. Nor is the tone always shrill and accusatory; often it is understated and ironic.

While writers such as Ravikumar (*Unmai Arithal*, 'On Knowing the Truth') are overt and insist a self-critical position, questioning the role of activism, others such as Bama (*Ivan*, 'This Man') highlight the 'we-versus-they' mindset. J.B. Sanakya, Sudhakar Kathak, and S. Thenmozhi attempt to test the scope of the narrative to uncover the underbelly of society, to call attention to the plight of 'the other'. The themes vary, of course, but indignation, a sense of injustice, and resentment at being exploited run as an undercurrent not far from the surface.

All the writers highlight the challenges involved in representing and reading the Dalit experience.


Covering over a century of writings (1890–2010), this anthology records the contests and dialogues of Dalits and their changing modes of representation.
Iyothee Thass
Rettamalai Srinivasan
M.C. Rajah
Swami Sahajananda
Meenambal Sivaraj
Veerammal
L. Elayaperumal
T.P. Kamalanathan
Anbu Ponnoviam
Raj Gauthaman
Indran
G. Chandrasekaran
K.T. Gandhirajan
P. Mathiyalagan
Imayam
Stalin Rajangam
Azhakiya Periyavan
J.B. Sanakya
S. Thenmozhi
N.D. Rajkumar
Mathivannan
Prathiba Jeyachandran
Bharathi Nivethan
Abimani
V. Venkatasalam
M. Jeeva
S. Sukirtharani
Ku. Umadevi
Bama
P. Sivakami
Cho. Dharuman
K.A. Gunasekaran
Ravikumar
K. Krishnaswamy
Thol. Thirumavalavan
Sudhakar Kathak
A. Vincent Raj
Yazhan Aathi
The Oxford India Anthology of Tamil
OXFORD
The Oxford In
Ta
Dalit

camphor, incense sticks, puffed rice, and toasted gram were all arranging their goods on coarse canvas spreads. Balloon sellers, the ice-cream man, flower-sellers, and gypsies with needles and beads, all began to thread their way through the crowds. As the crowds increased, so too did the noise; and this in turn made for more and more excitement.

A man wearing a red cloth on his shoulder, warned, 'It will rain soon. Hurry up and get on with cooking the pongal. Once the rain and the wind arrive, it won't be possible to do anything. Last year, it started to rain by twelve or one.' The woman standing next to him replied, 'You get on with digging out the hearth and don't waste time chattering or star-gazing. There isn't anywhere here to take cover once it begins to rain.' She opened her bundle and began to take out all the materials she had brought with her. A man hurrying past, said to his wife who was following him, 'Go to the shops and get back quickly. We must finish everything before it pours.'

Towards the west of the Ponnuruvi shrine, at a distance of about twenty or thirty feet, under a neem tree standing there, a man was digging a hole to make a hearth. A woman sat next to him, cutting up a pumpkin. In front of her there was a woman suckling a baby. The child was streaming with sweat. The woman fanned the child with the end of her saree, and then fanned herself. Suddenly she said, 'Heaven knows why the sun is beating down so early in the morning. Even under this tree, there isn't a whisper of a cool breeze. If this carries on for another ten days, it will be the end of us.' At this, the woman cutting up the pumpkin returned, 'It's going to rain today, definitely, before sunset. By tomorrow, the heat will lessen. Isn't it for the rain that we're here? It could arrive at any minute.'

'Looking at the state of the skies, I have to say, it seems doubtful. The child has boils because of the heat. When even adults can't bear it, how can a child's tender body manage?'

'Yes, it's like that now. But the rain will arrive by the evening. It's a promise that has held for twenty years. How can it not rain? All these people have come here today because they believe this firmly. Can't you see them around you?'

'Of course it will be a good thing if it rains. It's just that I'm not sure it will happen. Who knows what is in that Amma's heart, today? Everything is happening the wrong way round, today. Four or five years ago, too, the rains failed.'

'You tend to doubt everything. But of all things, should you doubt the deity's power? It's because of the rain that this Saami has such a

reputation in all the villages around here. You know, don't you, that this Amma's life was lost in the brimming tank? Whatever happens, the rains won't fail today. The Saami will test us, certainly, but she will come to our aid in the end.'

'It's no good talking to you,' the other woman said, just as two children ran towards her and threw their arms around her neck. 'Don't go and fall on the baby!' she warned them, 'Why can't you sit still in one place for a bit? Why are you wandering about in this burning heat?' But they wouldn't listen to her and began nagging her for money to buy ice-cream instead.

The woman cutting up the pumpkin put the pieces into a large vessel and rose to her feet saying 'No sign of the man who said he was going to buy a coconut, and the girl who went to fetch water has disappeared as well. I'll just go and take a look. If you come to a place, don't you have to stay together? There's going to be a big downpour today. What sort of man is he that doesn't know this much?' She went towards to the Ponnuruvi shrine, trying to see if her husband was among the crowd there. Everywhere she looked, she could see sarees, coloured bright red or yellow. There were at least sixty or seventy places where families gathered, making preparations for their pongal. A large crowd was bathing in the Pottai Tank. Men and woman were walking about and criss-crossing everywhere. Taking in all the sights around her, the woman arrived in front of the shrine. She raised her eyes to the deity and lifted her hands in obeisance.

The banyan tree wasn't a very old one; it had grown for only about twenty years. But it had the sturdy growth of a tree that had been well fertilized and its shade spread over a good quarter *kaani* of land. A wide cement stage had been built around its base and resting against the tree-trunk, the shrine stood, like a three-foot high cage. An oil-lamp burned inside. About twenty tridents had been fixed into the ground, surrounding the tree. That was all it was, the Ponnuruvi shrine. As the woman stood gazing at the lamp burning within the cage, she was moved suddenly; she prostrated full length on the ground, in worship. At the same time, a couple of women arrived, their clothes wet from their bath in the tank, to worship the Saami. The pujari who sat on the raised stage gave them sacred ash. They received the sacred ash and the *kunkumam*, touched the red saree wrapped around the tree, and made obeisance. Then they helped themselves to the bangles heaped up beneath the red saree, slipped them on to their wrists, and melted into the crowds.

The woman, having watched all this, began to move northwards, as more and more women arrived for worship. Walking along, gazing about her on her way she stumbled against an old woman who sat in her path. Full of remorse for what she had done, she addressed the old woman, 'Where are you from Amma, which village? You are sitting here alone in the heat, do you need some water or anything? Do you know where your family and kinsfolk are?' She tried asking her a number of questions, but there was no reply from the old woman. 'It seems there's something wrong with her head,' she told herself and continued her search for her husband and daughter.

People coming and going past her, did indeed glance at the old woman sitting a little to the north of the shrine, in a certain kind of way. Her form and her appearance certainly gave the impression to passers-by that she might be mad. Her gaze was fixed on the red saree wrapped about the banyan tree. Nothing distracted that look, neither the coming and going of the crowd, nor the din round about. It was even doubtful whether she was aware that people from many villages from afar had gathered there, that they were making their offerings to Ponnuruvi Saami. Had she been the old Nagammal, she would have been totally aware of everything.

* * *

It was now more than twenty years since Nagammal was her real self. She and her husband, Chinnasami, used to work for Samidurai Padayachi. Chinnasami's parents, too, had been labourers there, for that family. During harvest time, the labourers belonging to all the families of the village used go and keep guard over the fields. On one occasion when they arrived, there were seven or eight thieves there, beating the grain off the paddy. In the bright moonlight, it was plain to see what they were up to. Chinnasami was in a hurry; he called out loudly to the other labourers, 'They are stealing the paddy, come on, doy!' Immediately the thieves were alerted and surrounded Chinnasami. In order to shut him up, they thrust his head into the irrigation channel nearby. The mud entered his nostrils and he choked to death. The thieves were shocked by what they had done, and fled, leaving behind even the grain they had gathered. Chinnasami's death became known only on the following morning. Ponnuruvi was an eight month foetus in Nagammal's belly at the time.

From the time she was a little girl, Ponnuruvi worked in Samidurai Padayachi's house, along with her mother. She went home only to go

to sleep. The rest of her time was spent at Padayachi's house. And that is how a relationship began, between her and Padayachi's grandson. As a result, Ponnuruvi's stomach began to swell. Six months went by. Nagammal tried to take care of the business secretly, wanting to cleanse her daughter's womb, without, at the same time, antagonizing Padayachi's family. She wanted to take Ponnuruvi elsewhere, since everyone would come to know if the baby was aborted in the village. She couldn't manage that, however; so she tried to do it locally. With all the indecision, a month went by. And one way or another, the news spread about. Step by step the affair slipped out of Nagammal's hands and was taken over by the village. In turn, the village divided into two.

The foetus in Ponnuruvi's womb became a matter of discussion for the entire village. The people of the Dalit Colony, remembering everything done to them in the past by those living in the upper caste streets, kept guard over Ponnuruvi, refusing to allow her to abort the infant. Besides this, they determined not to work for their employers until the matter was resolved properly. They stopped anyone who tried to go to work, besides. It was at that point, when matters came to a head that the caste people united. Inviting two or three Dalits to go with them, they took the problem to their panchayat. The Dalits were insistent that there should be a marriage. Matters worsened when the Dalits threatened to go to the police if the caste people refused to comply with their wishes. Gradually, Ponnuruvi's problem became the concern of many villages in the area. Ponnuruvi, thinking that because of her, her own village, as well as many others were in trouble, and that while she was alive, the problem would never be resolved, decided to commit suicide. She was rescued twice, and beaten up, for her pains. Nagammal too, received her share of blows, with the abuse, 'Why did you give birth to a whore who wanders all over town?' Nagammal hit herself on her head, saying, 'If this village is to return to normality, she must die; she must die.' She lamented aloud, 'She has committed a sin which will not be forgotten for seven times seven generations.' Ponnuruvi, for her part, struck her stomach, crying out, 'All this is happening because of this *saniyan*.' Desperate to get rid of her burden, she tried several remedies: raw papaya, sesame seeds, jaggery. But the foetus stayed firm, as if a piece of granite were bound inside her womb.

For six or seven days, the colony people were resolute in their decision not to work for the caste houses. This news spread to the neighbouring villages. Some began to say they should allow an abortion. But most of the villages thought they should not allow it. The people of more

than ten villages were losing their sleep, by now, because of Ponnuruvi's unborn child. The caste people considered how best to put an end to the affair. In the end, the caste people from three or four villages put their heads together, and summoned Nagammal and Ponnuruvi to come to them secretly, and counselled them. 'A wrong has been done. Now it looks as if it is going to cause difficulties in several villages roundabout. Before our reputation suffers further, it is better to get these two married secretly, take them towards Mayavaram, and settle them with our kinsfolk there. Let them find employment and live out their lives there. We are people from three or four villages advising you; trust us. We speak for your own good. If you refuse this, it's your daughter's life that will be ruined. Besides, the village will turn into a bloody battlefield. We are upper caste people, speaking to you. We are not a caste that speaks false words. Do you think this is the first time this kind of thing has happened? Haven't we dealt with such affairs in the past? These fellows are getting all agitated, as if something exceptional has suddenly sprung up. Let them carry on; we'll see to it. This is women's business. It's for you to decide, now.'

Neither Ponnuruvi nor Nagammal could go against them. Anxious only that there should be no further trouble in the village, they nodded their heads to everything the caste people told them. And they did believe what they were told, absolutely. The caste folk gave details of everything clearly: at which temple the marriage would take place, where they were to travel after that, and by what route. Nagammal brought Ponnuruvi to the designated place, at the designated time, just as agreed, in great secret, and handed her over. Not even three or four hours went by, after that. In the morning came the news that Ponnuruvi's corpse was found floating in the Pottai Tank.

The colony people were extremely perplexed. They kept asking each other, 'How could it have happened?' Nagammal was not the sort to go against the decision of the village. And how did Ponnuruvi even come out of the house and escape the villagers' surveillance? Had she been found hanging, or poisoned by eating *arali* seeds, they might have believed she died at her own hands. But nobody believed that she could have drowned herself in the Pottai Tank. She knew perfectly well the Pottai Tank was out of bounds for the colony people. Even if she had climbed in to wash herself, it was difficult to believe she had somehow slipped and drowned. They said to each other, it wasn't credible that a twenty-year-old who knew how to swim would die in that tank. Nobody knew quite what to do and how. There was further confusion as to

who would take the initiative to go beyond the law. They tried taking hold of Nagammal and shaking her. She lay curled up, as if she had fainted.

The caste people would not allow the Dalits to remove the corpse. They said that Ponnuruvi had climbed into the tank either to drink the water or to wash herself, and then slipped and drowned. How could a woman from the colony dare to approach the tank? Now how was it possible for the upper castes to use the tank water when a corpse lay there? Hereafter from which tank were they to fetch water for their cattle? Where must they wash their animals? Most importantly, how were they to wash after they relieved themselves? The caste people began to make a lot of trouble. While they appealed to their panchayat, the colony people found themselves unable to make their case. There wasn't a single one among them who didn't curse Ponnuruvi. 'Just see: when she was alive she was trouble, when she died she continues to make trouble, the whore!'

They had to submit to the upper caste panchayat decision, but affirmed that they could pay only half the fine imposed on them. The caste folk agreed to this and only after the money was paid would they allow the Dalits to claim the corpse. As they carried the body out of the water, night was beginning to descend. When they saw that swollen body, seven months pregnant, the entire colony gathered together and wept. Only Nagammal would not weep. Not a single tear would she shed. Above all, she would not even look at the corpse's face. She would not give in, however much they insisted.

After Ponnuruvi died, many stories began to circulate through the village. First there was a rumour that the sound of a woman weeping endlessly, could be heard by the shores of the tank, at midnight. Then there was talk of her wandering about as a ghost. And many things happened, which were in keeping with the people's imaginings. The upper caste folk were now absolutely prohibited from climbing into the tank. Nobody could be certain why a small boy of five had wandered into the lake to wash himself, forgetting the rule, nor how he had slipped and drowned. But the entire colony was certain that Ponnuruvi had caught him by the leg and dragged him in. Before that story was forgotten, three baby goats fell into the same tank and died. More important news came that as Mutthusami Padayachi was grazing his goats at midday, he was overcome by chest pains, and died under the tamarind tree that stood close by the tank. And that wasn't the end. There were three upper caste men who took the lead in the dispute over

Ponnuruvi. Of those, one began to suffer from diarrhoea, was taken to the Chidambaram Hospital, only to return as a corpse. A second person's wife hanged herself, because of a trivial altercation, leaving four children behind. And two cows belonging to the third man were bitten by something poisonous in the jungle.

Unusually, a woman from the upper caste streets became possessed. On the same day three women aborted their babies spontaneously. At the same time two or three pregnant women gave birth to stillborn babies. In this way, because there was a death every day, or an inauspicious event every week, the entire village was shaken and overcome with fear. Everyone believed that all these events happened because of Ponnuruvi's curse. There was a pervading dread as to what might happen next and to whom. And it did indeed seem that events happened, for the very purpose of fanning that fear.

Now the men began to say, 'Why on earth did we chuck a stone on shit?' Women insisted, 'A sin against a woman will never vanish. It will demand redress from all seven gotras.' The women pleaded that some way should be found to escape Ponnuruvi's anger and her curse. What's more, they said that if they made pongal offerings to her themselves, her fury might abate. Only Chidambaram Pillai, who owned the house opposite the Sivan temple exclaimed, 'You've gone and deified a parachi, somehow.' But his words didn't have any effect on the panchayat's decision. The caste people couldn't make the food offering, themselves. So the panchayat determined that the responsibility for making the offering should be handed over to Ponnuruvi's kinsfolk, and the expenses would be borne by the caste people as a whole. It was consequent to that decision that the first offering was made to Ponnuruvi on the shores of the Pottai Tank.

From the very day that Ponnuruvi's's corpse was found in the tank, the caste people stopped going anywhere near it. They never even drew water from it for their goats and cattle. They didn't bathe their animals there. They didn't allow them to drink from it. Even if they were caught short when they were up and about, and had to relieve themselves hurriedly, they never washed themselves there. In this matter, even the small children didn't dare to go against the ban imposed by the village elders. The very next day after Ponnuruvi died, they sought out an old tank which lay to the west of the Perumal temple, dug it free of silt, and began to use it for their needs.

Nagammal performed Ponnuruvi's eighth month rites and all the other funeral rituals on the shores of the Pottai Tank. She drew the water

for these rites from that very tank. She herself bathed there. Thereafter, the tank became Nagammal's.

From the time of Ponnuruvi's death, Nagammal left off going to work and spent her entire time sitting on the shores of the tank. Or she would walk round and round its shores. At first her kinsfolk insisted on dragging her back home. Gradually and in time, they left her own devices. Night and day, she stayed on the shores of the tank. She didn't go home even to escape from the cold and the rain. When she was surrounded by crowds, she was just the same as when she was on her own. The expression on her face was always the same: as if she was carrying a huge burden. She never spoke an unnecessary word to anyone. She came into their street only when she was overcome by an unbearable hunger. Then she would go and stand in front of one house or another. She'd accept whatever was given to her and return the next minute to the tank without exchanging a single word. Many people would realize that she was still alive only when they caught sight of her. Whatever relationship she had with the village people had snapped a long time ago. But stories about her were told in the village, nevertheless. Night or day, she never slept a wink. People said that she talked to someone all through the night. Besides this, they began to refer to her as a mad woman, crazy, cracked in the head.

Gradually, all these stories too dwindled. As if she were indeed mad, Nagammal brought different kinds of plants, pulled up from elsewhere, planted them around the lake, watered them, and created a very temple garden around the lake. She gathered around it fifty to sixty trees: neem, banyan, pipal, pungu, and others.

In time, Pottai Tank became an important place in the village. It turned into a place where travellers could rest, where gypsies gathered and dispersed, where the panchayat met, a place where card games, or board games such as 'goats and tigers' were held. Everything seemed to happen casually: the caste villagers requesting the pongal offering to Ponnuruvi; Nagammal making the offering on the tank's shores for the eighth month ritual and the completion of the funeral rites, and thereafter, on every amaavaasai night, and on the occasion of each death anniversary; Nagammal gathering and planting the trees and shrubs; lighting an oil-lamp underneath the banyan tree for worship; making a heap of stones around the lamp and guarding it from dying out. Following Nagammal, children who grazed goats and cattle, and travellers passing by also began to worship there, and light camphor at the lamp. It was they who turned Ponnuruvi into a deity.

Ponnuruvi was dead. But her story became established as a never-ending myth. It became a story told endlessly by young and old. If Ponnuruvi had not floated as a corpse in Pottai Tank, had the upper-caste people continued to use the tank for the needs as was their custom, had her death been like all the other deaths that befell the villagers, it would have been forgotten easily. But today, Ponnuruvi was no longer Nagammal's daughter. She was a deity, a god. A god who never failed to grant the prayers and vows made to her. A god who brought the rains on the day she died, because she was murdered. You couldn't point to a single person from the surrounding villages who had not prayed to her, asking for help in arranging a marriage, for a boy child, for an illness to be cured, for the crops to flourish. Ponnuruvi, in fact, became a Ponnurvi Sami to whom even thieves made vows. In the villages surrounding Cheeti Kattalai, these days, there was at least one Ponnuruvi in each family. In some there were even two, called 'Little Ponnuruvi' and 'Big Ponnuruvi'.

Only the older people knew that Nagammal was Ponnuruvi's mother. For the little ones, she was a wanderer. A woman whose mind was impaired. All the same, even though she seemed like a stick of firewood clad in a saree, she was still alive. Samidurai Padayachi's house, on the other hand, was like a house that had burned down. On the very same day of the eighth month offering, following Ponnuruvi's death, as if a curse had come upon him, Samidurai Padayachi died of a heart attack. Not even a month had gone by after his death, when his second son died, struck by lightning during a summer storm. His eldest son left the village on the day Ponnuruvi died. To this day he had not returned. Nor had there been any news of him. In the past three or four years there hadn't been a single grown man in that household. And for twenty years there were no boys born into that family, either.

* * *

A middle-aged woman approached the pujari and handed over a dozen bangles and a small box of kunkumam. The pujari accepted them and offered them to the deity. Next, three women came together, also bringing bangles and kunkumam boxes. The pujari offered them up as well. Then he handed the women some sacred ash. The women took the holy ash, smeared it across their foreheads, helped themselves to what they wanted from the heap of bangles lying next to the shrine, and then went on their way. More and more women began to arrive, with bangles and kunkumam boxes.

There was a much bigger crowd now, compared to the morning. People from the local village had began to gather, at last. As the crowd increased, the noise grew louder and louder. A small crowd had gathered around the astrologer with his parrot, sitting beneath a punga tree, to the west of the shrine. He was making money, steadily. A little further north from him, the row of bangle stalls drew the densest crowds. Little girls were jostling and shoving to try and buy bangles and small kunkumam boxes. These were the objects most pleasing to Ponnuruvi.

Suddenly another small crowd gathered in front of the shrine. A woman was swaying and shaking, possessed by the deity. Three or four men tried to hold her down, but could not control her movements. The deity was moving about in a frenzy. From the crowds a woman called out, 'Amma, tell us what is your wish, we'll do it. We have brought you bangles without stinting. We have brought you kunkumam. We have sacrificed a rooster. We have chosen a red saree for you, fine enough to make all the other gods jealous. Tell us what more you would like. What is the reason for your coming here?' But the deity would say nothing. A man from the crowd asked, 'Will it rain today?' The entire crowd joined in and asked whether it would rain that day. But the god would do nothing more than shout, '*de, de*'. She gave no predictions, no words of mercy. There was no reply whatever, throughout the possession, and up to the moment the god left the woman. After that, when the first woman was resting, the god entered another woman. The crowd now gathered around her instead. Once again, the crowd asked the god if it would rain that day. But there was no word: it was as if the god's mouth was locked up. All that happened was the frenzied swaying and straining of the neck. One woman said, 'Give the god something to drink.'

The crowd's hopes were thwarted; no god had given them words of comfort. There were also doubts as to whether it was going to rain or not. Everyone began to look slightly tense, anxious. Which god would tell them whether the rains would come or not? A look of yearning spread across their faces, as they waited to hear theses words from some woman's lips.

The sun was at its height, now. The heat bore down with its full force. The wind burnt like fire. But the crowd took no notice. They began to make their pongal offerings to the deity in good time, in the hope that that the rains would come. As time went on, the number of people gathered there grew even more. The pujari struggled to keep up. His assistant was in total confusion. It was difficult to make out who said what, to keep in mind each person's gift. It was the noise that

contributed most of all, to the pandemonium. As more and more people came to make their offering and the crowds thronged around the shrine, Nagammal got up and began to walk away. Nothing seemed to affect her, not the people rushing to and fro, nor the children playing and shouting. She walked on, looking for a tree beneath whose shade she might sit. There were families gathered beneath each tree. She walked on, some distance away from the shrine, towards the west. Here it was less crowded and she sat down in the shade of a neem tree, leaning against its trunk. In front of her, three families were making everything ready to cook their pongal offering. A robust looking woman, sitting facing south and tucking firewood into a hearth, remarked to the man sitting by her side, preparing a coconut, 'Every year the sky starts to darken, usually by midday. This year, on the contrary, it's like a white saree up there. Heaven knows when it will rain!'

The man answered, 'There's not going to be a drop of rain today. The astrologer has said that if it does, by some chance, he is ready to give up predicting the future.'

'Where does that astrologer come from?'

'Can you see that neem tree over there? Look there, towards the north. Can you see him sitting there under the tree, with his udukku drum? He said so.'

'You can hit that prediction with a shoe. Just because that black tongued man says so, do you think the rain will hold off? A promise is central to the god; diet is central to good health. Is it likely the rains won't come today? We'll have at least a single drop. There will be rain and wind, most definitely, you'll see.'

'How can you say that?'

'I know it. This Amma always grants a boon when you make a vow to her. It was only after I came here and offered myself to her, that your fifth child was born a boy. Last year, when my father lay in bed, unable to lift his limbs, didn't he get up the very next day after I brought the sacred ash from here and smeared it on his forehead? Are you a man, to forget all that god has done for you? For how many people, from how many villages, has that Amma granted favours? Doesn't she know what is in the hearts of all the people gathered here? Can she be blind to that extent?'

'If a king admires her, a woman becomes a beauty to all eyes.'

'Chi, shut your mouth. Those words come from a male heart. That Amma gave up her life, not just for her own sake. After her death, didn't every farm labourer stop working, as if protected by a fence? By whose

grace do women from these villages all round dare to walk safely, night or day? You yourself had a series of girl children born to you. How can you forget all that?'

As the woman was scolding her husband, two little girls aged six or seven, came running up. Panting for breath, they said, 'Appa, we need some money.' The man merely scowled at them. The children began to wail.

'Why are you crying, *di*?' the woman asked them.

'We need to buy bangles to offer to the god. He won't give us the money,' the elder girl said, through her tears.

Immediately, the woman turned into a fury. She shouted, 'Are you denying them the money to make an offering to the god? Your hands will become empty. Give them a rupee each, Ayya.'

He protested, 'You took five rupees from me yourself, as soon as we arrived, to make an offering.'

She returned, 'Chi, are you a man? How can you keep count of what you give to the god!' At this, the man took out a five-rupee note and handed it to the children, without a word. As soon as it came into their hands they flew away like little birds.

Two people walked past, talking, on their way towards the coconut stall. 'How the sun is striking down, today of all days! Will it rain? People have begun to make their food offering. But there are no signs at all of rainfall. We were disappointed like this six, seven years ago, when it looked as if it might come down, but didn't. It might happen again, today.'

What had happened to the skies? Usually, on the day of the pongal offering to Ponnuruvi, the skies would darken by midday. Sometimes, even as the pongal was placed on the leaf for the offering, the rain would come down. People were happiest when they made their offering, soaking wet from the rain. In fact, some people came to make the offering, with the very purpose of getting wet in the rain. But it was doubtful, looking at the skies, whether, on that occasion, it would happen. The sun's heat threatened to turn their faith into a false belief.

Now, family by family, people were returning after making their pongal offering. As soon as they returned to their own spaces, they sat down to eat. Every family, without fail, set out a leaf containing the food, for the crows. Now, there were people sitting down in small groups and eating, under every single tree. A few were still going up to the shrine to make their offering. In front of Ponnuruvi Saami's shrine, there was quite a hubbub going on. Everyone, both those who were eating already

and those who were still making their offerings, looked less happy than they did in the morning. Everyone spoke wearily. Whatever they were doing, everyone stopped and looked up at the sky, now and then. Many people came there, usually to enjoy the rain more than to cook the pongal, to pray to the deity, to take vows. It was the rain that people desired most, prayed for. A good ten days before the day of the pongal offering to Ponnuruvi Saami, everyone's heart filled with the belief that the rains would come. It was that belief that incited people to walk ten miles, twenty miles without getting tired. But it looked as if today that belief was being turned on its head.

Four or five families sat eating their pongal beneath a pipal tree which stood next to the potter's stall. The bald man who sat leaning against the trunk, spoke up, expressing his deep disappointment, 'The gods are just like human beings. Just as the times change, so do the gods. For twenty years things went as they should. Today, though, the air is like fire. Someone in this crowd might have done something wrong, or might not have done what they should; who knows. The god hasn't shown mercy; the skies have not darkened. There's no point in sitting here any longer. Collect your things. Let's go. This morning, as we were setting off, a cat crossed our path. I thought immediately that it was a sign of ill-omen. My fears have come true. Now we are not going to have any rain or anything. Get ready, let's go.'

But a woman who was rinsing a large cooking vessel said, 'No, don't say that, *Maama*. She lost her life in the water, will she deny us water? You see whether it doesn't come pouring down before sunset. She brought us rain for twenty years, won't she do it today? Is there anything in the world the gods can't do? It *will* rain today. I can promise that on the heads of my three children.'

All the people sitting nearby turned and gazed at the woman as she spoke. A middle-aged man who was with a family sitting towards the west asked the woman, 'Every astrologer has said even if you beckon to the rain, it's not going to come today, there isn't the planetary force. Are you saying they are telling lies?'

Without hesitation, the woman snapped back, 'Is the god's word more important, or the astrologer's?'

'The god's.'

'In that case, it must rain today.'

'What makes you say that?'

'The god is what she is because of your faith in her. Otherwise she is chaff. You can doubt even the child you gave birth to. But you must never doubt god. She is a god only if you have faith in her. If you have faith, it will happen.' She went on scouring the vessel and washing it.

'There have been so many times when this god didn't bring us rain. Have you forgotten all the times we came here hoping for it to fall and were disappointed?'

But the woman swore at him and turned her face away, sharply.

The sun began to sink towards the west. There wasn't a single cloud in the sky. The wind was still burning hot, like a hearth fire. The crowds in front of Ponnuruvi Saami's shrine began to lessen. Finding the heat unbearable, a number of people were bathing in the tank. A couple of families began to bundle up their belongings. Some, who had arrived very late, were still making their preparations for the offering. Two or three families began to move off.

It was getting late. The belief that it would not rain now began to spread. A short, stout man came from the direction of the shrine and joined the others beneath the neem tree, saying at once, very loudly, 'Don't you realize it's getting late? Can't you see that people are starting to go home? Don't we have to get back in good time? It's not going to rain now. Today that Amma has smeared all our faces with charcoal. If the god doesn't keep a promised word, then what's left? When all's said and done, she was born just a human being, after all. The money you see in your dreams isn't money you can spend. The dog that gnaws a bone can never bite iron. Hereafter, who among the farming people is going to respect us? A fine god she is! ' Saying this, he began to pack up all the goods they had brought.

An old woman who was also sitting there tried her best to pacify him, saying, 'Wait, Thambi, let's give it a little more time. Is some thief going to run off with our house? It will stay where it is; it's not going to walk off.' But it didn't seem as if he heard a single word she said.

The old woman then turned towards the shrine and said, 'Ei Ponnuruvi, Mother, stop all these people's mouths by allowing a single drop of rain to fall. Let not your reputation go to ruin, Amma!' She looked up at the skies and folded her hands.

Just then a middle-aged woman ran towards the shrine, weeping and exclaiming, 'Oh, I've lost the chain which was around my neck!' Two or three other women ran after her.

The old lady asked, 'What is going on, Thambi, the crowds seem to be running somewhere?' But her son didn't answer; he just bundled up all their things silently.

Now they were going home, family after family. The crowd that had gathered in front of the shrine and in the tank had lessened by more than half. As the people left, the numbers of crows and dogs began to gather in greater numbers. They fought over the food left on the leaves on which people had eaten. Monkeys, too turned up from somewhere, to join them. As for them, their only target was the bananas in the little children's hands.

The pujari who officiated at the Ponnuruvi shrine, a kinsman of Nagammal, spread out a saree that had been given as offering, threw on to it all the coins which people had gifted, and tied them all up in a bundle. His assistant gathered up all the red and yellow sarees into a sack. The pujari yelled at the assistant to tie up the coconuts and limes separately. He seemed to be the only person there who looked happy. Every now and then he glanced at the crowd that remained and up at the sky. He scowled at a woman who arrived there just then saying, 'What is this, di, why have you come so late? It might still rain and spoil everything. Don't we have to take everything home before that? Look at her, beggar's daughter, arriving just at the time of the washerman's departure!' He ordered the assistant, 'Lift one of the bundles on to her head and send her home.'

As the sun sank lower and lower in the west, the crowd thinned out more and more. There were only a couple of families or so in front of the shrine. The noise and bustle had quietened. In all, there were, probably, no more than a hundred people left. There was not much expectation of rain; people spoke to each other wearily. Trade had decreased during the afternoon as soon as the idea took hold that there would not be any rain. Now the coconut stall keeper began to bundle up his wares. The potter loaded his cart with all the unsold pots. The bangleseller took down his stall.

All of a sudden, Nagammal left the shade of the punga tree, came out, and looked up at the sky with her dim eyes. Then she went straight to the Pottai Tank, dipped her head into the water, and came up to the Ponnuruvi Sami shrine. She made an obeisance to the deity. Neither the pujari nor his assistant said a word to her. They were totally absorbed in packing up the gifts and offerings. Nor did Nagammal appear to pay them any heed. Having worshipped at the shrine, Nagammal walked on slowly, looking at each tree as she passed. As if a sudden thought had struck her, she began to put out the still smouldering cooking fires. Then she picked up the stones that lay beside the holes dug out to make the hearths and gathered them all up in a single heap.

There were seven or eight people gathered beneath a neem tree that stood next to the parched gram stall. An older man who sat among them said, 'If a single drop of rain were to fall today, that would be enough.'

The man sitting next to him added, 'If it does rain, I will arrange to have a bigger shrine built, before next year's pongal offering to the god.'

A young man wearing a red shirt, aged about twenty years, added, 'For my part, I'll contribute ten sacks of cement.'

At that moment someone exclaimed, 'I think I smell something in the breeze. Run and take a look at the sky!'

The youth in the red shirt ran out of the shade to take a look and called out, 'I can see clouds, Thatha!'

The old man rose to his feet with unaccustomed haste and went to see, the others following. Pieces of cloud could be seen in the western sky. But they were absolutely white. Yet, when people saw them, a small ray of hope entered their hearts. They returned to their shade and resumed their conversation. The red-shirted youth pointed at Nagammal, saying, 'We gain merit by doing good deeds. Come on, let's all go and put out the fires. Let's fill up the holes that have been dug out. We'll pick up thorny sticks and twigs. We don't have the good sense that even an old lady has. Come on, *da*.'

After that all the men and women joined Nagammal in searching out the cooking fires which were still smouldering. Suddenly a woman called out, 'The sky is darkening!' Everyone ran out to look at the sky, including those who sat under the trees.

As they saw the clouds darkening minute by minute, two men ran to the shrine, calling, 'Let's light camphor for the god.' In haste they bought camphor, lit it and made their obeisance. They helped themselves to a handful of bangles which lay in a heap on the raised stage, tied them at their waists and then returned. They began to gather up the sticks which still lay beside the makeshift hearths, hurriedly. All those who were still sitting beneath the trees and those who had begun to bundle up their goods now joined the others, clearing up all the cooking spaces, as if they were offering a service to the god.

The sky continued to change colour. A cool breeze blew. Nagammal took no notice of what the others did. She was entirely engrossed in putting out fires and gathering up sticks and stones, and heaping them up some distance away.

The cool breeze continued to blow and people became more and more excited. Suddenly there was a more forceful wind. And with the

wind, the clouds began to dissolve away. The gathering clouds changed colour once more. The people who were clearing the area stopped their work to gaze at the sky. One man hastened to the shrine, stood in front of the deity and prayed, 'Mother, save us; let not the wind blow away the clouds.' In the belief that his faith and prayers would bear fruit, he seized hold of a handful of sacred ash and smeared it on his forehead.

But the strength of the wind continued to dissolve the clouds. Within ten minutes the clouds had turned white again. The clouds vanished, like smoke. Disappointment spread over the faces of all those who had been staring at the sky. A middle-aged man flung away the stones he had gathered and spoke bitterly, 'A god should grant the boon that we pray for. That's what a god should do. What sort of god is it who doesn't know what's in our heart, who won't act accordingly?'

A short, fat man answered him. 'It's very wrong to complain against a god. If not today, it will definitely rain tomorrow. Is it likely that it won't rain at some time? The wind came and spoilt it all, as if a growing child were ruined by its own mother. So what could the god do about it? Wait and see, it could still rain before it gets dark. Do you think she is an ordinary deity? This deity will never fail to fulfil a vow made to her. This is absolutely certain.'

At this, the middle-aged man spoke with great frustration, 'That's what we have believed and hoped since this morning, but it's all come to nothing. There's no point in believing any more that it might still rain. If you want, you can sit here, saying, "It will rain, it will rain." As for us, we're off.' Saying this, he told his wife to pick up their bundles. He refused to listen anymore to the others, and began to walk ahead. Two other families, seeing him, followed suit.

The short, dark man tried to comfort the few people left. 'What is the need for the rush? The god is testing us, that's all it is. Should you rush off because of that? If it doesn't rain this year, it certainly will, next year. Four or five years ago, the same thing happened. This is all the deity's playfulness. Can man understand god's game?' But now, nobody paid him any heed. Even his wife had stopped listening, and stood up, her bundle on her head. The man didn't know what to do. He gazed yearningly up at the sky. Then he said, 'Wait di, I'll be back.'

He ran up to the shrine, quickly. He prostrated himself at full length and prayed, 'Please, Mother, bring the rain next year at least. Don't send the people away, disappointed.' He took the sacred ash and smeared it on his forehead before turning round. His wife had started to walk away. He hurried after her.

Nagammal went on at her own pace, picking up the stones by the cooking fires and taking them away. The western sky began to darken.

—Translated by Lakshmi Holmström

Eardrum*

Azhakiya Periyavan

A big sturdy male buffalo had been slaughtered on the Mariamman Feast day, and then its hide had been cleaned and spread out to dry. A pit was dug behind the house and filled with pebbles and the hide was soaked till all the hair came off. Then the softened hide was soaked some more. With gall-nut, babul tree bark, and *aavaaram* bark added in the proper proportions, it was given even more soaking. Any hair which was still clinging to the hide was then scraped away with a sharp knife and the hide was stretched and pegged down firmly at the four corners. He had set it out in the sun to dry and kept vigil near it lest the dogs drag it away. Everything was ready. Today was the day when it had to be made. This time too, the search for wood from a jackfruit tree had turned out to be very frustrating. *Thanukan* wood was available, but that was not what he used.

Except Chinnakuzhandai, there was not a single soul in that village who knew how to make a *thappu*. He would grip the hide firmly, twist it, and tie it down, and then each blow on the drum leather would bring forth a booming response. He had grown old now, but he had not lost his ability.

Kaatturaja arrived early in the morning.

'You, Maama. Come on, get up. Let's go. We have to finish the job today.'

Kaatturaja, Chinnakuzhandai, and Saaman went to Kupputhaayi's house, downed some arrack, and then went to the cattle-shed in Kaatturaja's yard. Kaatturaja had brought with him some meat that he had asked his wife to cook. The pungent smell of cattle urine was in the air. The work got under way on the manure-smeared floor of the cattle-shed. A pot and a drum-frame hung side by side in a corner. Chinnakuzhandai cut the leather hide to the size of the frame and

* Original title *Sevippaarai*.

started making holes in it at regular intervals of a handspan. Kaatturaja tore strips of leather from the leftover hide. The sour smell of gall-nut in which the hide had soaked rose in waves from the leather. They first pulled the leather over the frame and tied down all four corners firmly. Then they carefully threaded the leather thongs through the holes, twisted them, and tied them tight.

'How the times have changed, *raja*! Nowadays they are using plastic sheets and screw bolts to make drums. Their drums make a dup … dup sound. Now this is what I call a *real* drum. When you beat it, see how it vibrates, DUNG … DUNG.'

'Oh, don't talk about all that. Why don't you sing that *uri** song?'

Uriyo uri uriyo uri
Panaimarathila paachhai
Ungamma … nda dosai
Uriyo uri uriyo uri
Marakkaa saama aalu
Marakka pillai pethaan
Uriyo uri uriyo uri.

Uriyo uri uriyo uri
Cockroach on the palm tree
Your Amma's cunt is like a dosa
The fellow with the big thing
Has fathered a big son
Uriyo uri

Saaman and Kaatturaja rolled about happily, their stained teeth on view.

'Maama, they are showing a damn good movie in Kalaimagal Cinema House. What dancing that actress Silk does, swaying her buttocks and all! You would never have seen such a thing in your time. Let's go this evening.'

'Even at this age the fellow just loves to see those Silk movies. He will go and sit in the front row and whenever her dance scene comes he will bend close to the floor and try to peer up her skirt.'

Saaman and Kaatturaja burst out laughing again. Chinnakuzhandai was paying no attention to them and was concentrating on tightening

* In this context, an uri is a pouch made with palm leaves and a long thread and filled with firecrackers. It is used as a firecracker in festivals.

the drum thongs. He was rather hard of hearing. He was totally deaf in one ear and could hear only slightly in the other. One had to go right up to him and shout into his ear. The children of the village would come near him as though wanting to tell him something and then they would shout 'Coo' into his ear and run away. Even the grown-ups would humiliate him. They would make rude remarks and laugh mockingly.

Now the thappu was ready. Chinnakuzhandai derived great joy in stroking and handling it. It was as if the feel of the drum in his hand gave his whole arm a new burst of joyful energy. By sheer force of habit he started playing the thappu. Chinnakuzhandai was in a class by himself when it came to playing the thappu. No one could match him in this. He was the master of all kinds of solo drum playing. *Othadi, ottiyadi, alangaram, thullal, tangu*—his fingers could play any or all of the sounds and rhythms. There had been a time when Chinnakuzhandai was the drummer everyone wanted, for every occasion and every festival—weddings and funerals, religious festivals and processions, coming-of-age, and ear-piercing ceremonies. Those days were gone. Nowadays people had started engaging bands for all the occasions. Chinnakuzhandai was still banging away ferociously on the newly made drum. His mind too was vibrating with the drum. His eyes grew bright and glistened. His face muscles were stretched and his teeth were visible. His hands, his whole body, the music itself—everything pulsated. The very air reverberated with the sound; the cattle-shed, the house, the street itself seemed to leap and twitch with the sound. So fiercely did he beat that drum that every stroke of his hand was a booming call to break into dance—and to keep dancing till every nerve and blood vessel in the body was strained to breaking point. Indeed, Kaatturaja had started dancing.

It had been a long time since Chinnakuzhandai had played on a thappu. In earlier days, for every occasion, someone would come and fetch Chinnakuzhandai and his thappu. Once his son had grown and taken up a government job, Chinnakuzhandai had stopped accepting those invitations. His son too had made his feelings very clear.

'Do you want me to move around in this village with dignity or not? If you go around playing drums any more, I will be really furious.'

If only he could once again play the drum to accompany old Parvathy's song ….

O you whose perfume pervades the world
O you elegant doe-like maiden,

O my adorable one
On whom the lovely five-hued parrot is perched
O truly a princess you are ....

Once Parvathy got going, she could keep singing till the fingers of the drummers grew tired of playing. She could produce an endless stream of songs. Songs for the fields, *kummi** songs, lullabies, dirges, all these were in Parvathy's repertoire. Those were the days when Chinnakuzhandai could still hear well. They had been ploughing Arsad Bai's fields which they had taken on lease. Each day was a joy, steeped in the sweet nectar of blossoming flowers. Even to this day the old man would insist that it was only in response to her singing that the crops in the field flourished so well. It was also around that time that Arsad Bai installed a water-pump in the field. No one in and around the village had ever owned a water-pump like this. The miracle of water gushing out of a pipe at the mere press of a button! Chinnakuzhandai had the childish habit of putting his ear to the end of the water-pipe to listen to the echoing sounds inside. The sounds were somewhat like the ones from telegraph cables. One day, when Chinnakuzhandai had his ear pressed to the opening of the pipe, Parvathy pressed the button. The force of the gushing water flung Chinnakuzhandai away to a distance. He fell against a tree and a sharp twig from it entered his ear and ruptured the eardrum. He became deaf in that ear. The force with which the water had slammed against his head had affected the hearing in the other ear too. From that day onwards, Parvathy stopped singing altogether.

Chinnakuzhandai watched two movies every week. Rain or shine, he would go. He would buy a ticket for a floor seat, settle down on a pile of sand and, munching from a packet of gram, watch the show. As for today's movie, Kaatturaja had told him that Silk was in it, but that was a lie. Chinnakuzhandai's anger against Kaatturaja and Saaman for this deception was soon assuaged by the actress Meena. By the time the film was drawing to an end, his mind had no room for any thought except Meena. Is there any movie in which the hero is a thappu player? In all these years of watching films, he had never come across a single one with a hero like that. The old man's mind became troubled. Even as the movie was going on, during a change of scene, Chinnakuzhandai's mind drifted away and lost touch with reality. With his dhoti tucked up,

* Dance, usually by young women, involving coordinated steps and hand-clapping, to the accompaniment of a rhythmic song. They dance in a circle around a pot placed in the centre of a colourful decorated pattern on the floor.

Bharathi is scattering the seedlings in the fields. The planting is going on in full swing. The young women have their sarees tucked up above their cucumber thighs. Beautiful Kannammal steps forward and bursts into song. Her music swells, wave upon wave, and captivates Bharathi. Chinnakuzhandai felt a pleasurable thrill. After all, Parvathy was about the same age as Meena, wasn't she? Vigour and vitality coursed through the old man.

That night he had a dream. Never in his life had he ever had a dream like this one. Everything in the world was made of drums. The sky was a gigantic drum, and so was the earth below. The ground that reverberated to the sound of running or walking footsteps was a drum. The moon was a drum. Everywhere, drums and more drums. Chinnakuzhandai is wandering around searching among the drums for Parvathy. His every breath, his merest touch make the drums resound, and the waves of drum-beats pursue him. After he has run a long way, he comes to an open valley. Once his eyes adjust to the dim light, he can see that the place is filled with *koel* birds. Parvathy is there, with koels resting on her shoulders and arms. He takes the moon-drum out of the sky. They both climb and climb till they reach the very top of a mountain. She sings. He plays the drum. The whole valley is their music. The sky fills up with it and the song-drops rain down in a musical downpour. The dream was still gnawing at his mind the next morning as Chinnakuzhandai set off before dawn to buy arrack. No children or grandchildren at home. Utter solitude. As the two of them sat down with a bowlful of curry and between them finished off the contents of the arrack bottle, Chinnakuzhandai and Parvathy could sense the rotation of the earth. Like puffs of cotton wool they were floating in the breeze. The old man started praising Meena. Parvathy went into a sulk. Overcome with emotions he had never experienced before, the old man embraced Parvathy and tried to kiss her—and received a slap on his face. He begged her to sing. He entreated and cajoled. The old woman obstinately refused.

The previous week the old man had gone to meet his son who lived in another town. He had asked him for a hearing aid.

'What's the need for it at this age?'

'Even your mother makes fun of me, da. I can't bear the way the whole village teases me.'

Just to keep his father satisfied the son took him on a so-called visit to a doctor. 'When I come next month I'll bring the hearing aid, Appa,' he said, and sent the old man home.

One day at dawn, when the light was still murky, Parvathy dashed the old man's fondest hopes to ashes. The old woman died. A heavy feeling descended on Chinnakuzhandai's chest. It was the weight of grief. It was a weight that would not allow him to think of anything, decide anything, do anything. He could not accept the fact that she was gone. Neither could he weep. Again and again, he would come and stand near her body and stare at her with wild eyes and then go away to sit in some corner. Kaatturaja and Saaman took him away and filled him to the brim with arrack. He mumbled and muttered incoherently. In fact, the house of death seemed to be a place of peace for the old man. People were talking all around him. But he heard nothing. Relatives and groups of village women clustered in groups and sobbed. He did not hear them. In front of the house, Kaatturaja and Saaman were playing the drums. He did not hear that either. He imagined that people were paying their respects to Parvathy in deep silence. He imagined that in a soundless world Parvathy had been laid out on view for everyone to come and gaze upon. Or, could it be that it was Parvathy who had snatched away all sound from everywhere and was refusing to let it go, wondered the old man. All kinds of people came and went. But not his son. A messenger had been sent to fetch him. Though his son had been inviting them to come and stay with him, the old man and woman had decided to stay on in the village all these years. Parvathy was the one who had been there for him. Now she was gone. Hereafter, even the old man's life was uncertain. It was a question of when the end would come. Everyone was talking—the old woman won't abandon him, they were saying, she will take him with her—so many words piling up and sliding around.

The sons of the landowner whose fields Chinnakuzhandai had tilled came and paid their respects. Memories flooded through the old man's mind. His eyes clouded over and he collapsed in a deep faint.

There was a big commotion. They took him into the house and put him in a chair. He regained consciousness and came outside again. The crowd swelled. The people moved about as if they had forgotten there was a corpse in their midst. The bundles of incense sticks wafted their essence in swathes of smoke. In the midst of it all lay the old woman, like a dry twig. Her mouth was open. She looks as if she is lying there singing; maybe she is singing right now; it is just that I can't hear her, the old man told himself. It struck him with full force for the first time that he was deaf. So many years had gone by without his being able to hear her speak or sing. His whole existence had come to depend on sign language or words shouted close to his ear. As he churned these thoughts over in his mind, something seemed to dissolve deep within his consciousness. His son arrived. New sounds of wailing and sobbing arose in the house of death. The old man too could no longer stop himself from weeping. The tears streamed from his eyes.

Once Parvathy had been buried and everyone had gone home, the house seemed very empty. He could not bring himself to go on living there alone. Unable to bear the restless fever of loneliness, he set out for Kaatturaja's house. Presently, the enticing sound of the drum began to send out its invitation. Chinnakuzhandai's fingers had found their rhythm. Kaatturaja appeared from somewhere. 'Maama, what is happening?' he asked in astonishment.

'Your aunt is singing, da.'

After a short pause, the steady beat of the thappu's started up again.

—Translated by Malini Seshadri

The Force of Gravity*

J.B. Sanakya

He became aware that the lingering pale light in the sky had been banished by the thickening, spreading darkness. It was as if the whole forest was shrouded in black dust. From the bushy slope he threw back his head and looked up at the big tree. The top of it was lost against the sky. The loud sounds of night insects started up. Panic entered his mind. He had to climb; he knew he could not go back on that decision. Why he would have to climb that particular tree was something he had considered. On the one hand, he knew there was a very good reason for it. On the other hand, he somehow could not explain that reason clearly. It was as though something was clouding his mind. Thick, rough layers of bark, split in long lines and bulging outwards, adhered firmly to the trunk.

The dark green leaves rustled in the deeper darkness of the night. In that gentle movement, through the small chinks between the leaves, the stars that had been hidden overhead could be seen here and there in the ashen sky. The sight brought some comfort to his mind.

* Original title *Puviyeerppu Visai.*

It frightened him to read his own mind and realize that there would be no escape from this forest unless he climbed that tree. A dry bare twig was jutting out. Once he started climbing, that would be his first hand-hold. It seemed to him that it would twist and break away under his weight. He tried to put both arms around the trunk of the tree. But it was massive. His arms did not reach even a quarter of the way around it. He pressed down hard on a part of the bark with the big toe of his right foot and simultaneously leaped up and grabbed the protruding twig, just as he had planned. The twig held firm. He could feel the pull of his own weight. He turned his head and laid it for a moment against the bark of the tree as he paused to regain his breath. Then he started climbing. He was part of the general blackness, he became one with the forest itself.

As he climbed higher and higher up the tree, he encountered branches from other trees that had intruded and set up relationships of their own. They obstructed his progress, stretching across his upward path, their ends lost to view in the darkness. A sudden flurry of birdsound brought a stab of fear to the mind. But still he climbed steadily upwards, as though propelled by something unseen. When he parted the branches above his head to see how far away he was from the top, he found that the tree was growing.

If he managed to get to the top of the tree, Amma would put aside her anger and call for him. She would weep. She would say all was forgiven. Then he could climb down and eat his meal.

The strain of climbing had made him feel very tired. His limbs were trembling with weakness. From somewhere a few insects, the size of large ants, came and started crawling over his fingers and arms. He shook them away and started climbing again. He had now crossed the thicker branches and was approaching the top, and he had to hold the slender branches to pull himself up.

From the forest below came the sound of footsteps—someone wearing slippers. The sound gradually grew louder. It must be Amma coming. Let her come. He was eager to see her weeping when she realized he had climbed up into the tree.

She was coming along in the darkness without a lamp, relying only on her own eyesight, carrying a brass vessel of food.

'Chinnu, where are you, da?'

Amma's voice, full of distress, spread through the forest and dissolved. It came back to her as an echo. On and on she walked, parting the bushes in her search, making her way among the trunks of the trees, weeping all the while.

'Chinnu, Amma won't beat you, da. Come on, sweetheart, come darling.'

The forest itself seemed to weep in sympathy with the mother's anguish. I must not reply to Amma's call. Weep, Amma. Go on, weep some more. Only then will I climb down, he murmured, with a cheeky grin.

The insects that had been crawling on him were increasing in number now. He scraped them off and squashed them. His hand felt sticky. In disgust he wiped the palms of his hands against one of the branches. The insects became too many for him to remove and squash.

'*Aiyyo, en saami,* without you your Amma will die, da.'

She had started weeping in real earnest. If he were to delay any more, she might do some harm to herself. Let me climb down, he decided, and started looking for the branches that he had used to pull himself up.

The tree was bare and branchless.

Panic gripped him. He knew he must get down at once. He lay chest down on the tree, and started sliding. His skin was scraped raw and burning. He could feel the blood trickling out through the scratches. Suddenly his limbs felt dead and his vision clouded. He did not know how and why he had lost his handhold. He was falling head downwards. He imagined the ground rushing up to meet him. He shut his eyes. But the invisible branches were breaking his fall as he hurtled down like a lifeless object.

He was sure he was dead. He looked up. The white cement roof tiles with their dark curving shapes looked down on him. Immediately a burst of energy infused his being. On a sudden urge, he got up and ran staggering to get outdoors and reassure himself. He collided against the latched door and moaned with the pain as he rubbed the bruise. The pain confirmed that he was still alive. Ashamed of his own panic, wearing a shame-faced grin, he unlatched the door. Light streamed in, along with the sounds of the town. In the sudden glare he squinted and looked out through the doorway.

Cement houses were scattered untidily like matchboxes all over the place. The rooftops, the terraces, the lines and lines of clothes, long dry but still hanging on the clotheslines. Yards and yards of sarees of various colours, children's school uniforms, and lots and lots of blue-checked lungis. A densely populated island. Below, the tea-shop was doing brisk

business. Some young girls, their faces unwashed, were watching the cooling of the tea, as it was poured back and forth from a screw-top pitcher in one hand to a wide-mouthed tumbler in the other. From somewhere inside came the sound of someone gargling and spitting. One of the girls moved aside, covered a tumbler with a scrap of newspaper to keep the tea hot, and took it away, carrying it as if she was having a problem with one of her hands.

Like him, others from the ground floor in the houses opposite also stood and watched. A dark man with an enormous belly, toothpaste foaming from his mouth as he brushed his teeth, turned and looked at him. The boy averted his eyes.

The landlord's wife was shouting at the top of her voice at the bachelors who lived on the floor below. As punctually as the radio news report, her voice would start up regularly at this hour. But those fellows were not in the least bothered about her shouting and the somewhat civil language of her scolding. In a floor meant for three persons, six of them were living, she complained. The job of pumping water to the terrace tank had increased threefold. Besides, the toilet was stinking. And then there was the matter of the thirty-five rupees they were supposed to pay her for keeping the common areas clean. They had not paid the money was her accusation. They had a single step at their entrance door. Every morning the woman would cursorily splash water from a vessel in the direction of their front step. Even if that were worth one rupee a day for thirty days, what were the extra five rupees for? No one knew.

The boy turned and looked into the room. Among the clutter of household articles stood some plastic bottles of water that had been brought from the hotel where they had had dinner. One of the bottles was lying sideways with a little water still left in it. Everything in the room belonged to the landlord. Except the plastic water bottles.

He shut the door without locking it and started up the stairs. He had to twist his body slightly to climb. The morning air felt pleasant. There was a flimsy metal latch, long, rusted, and hanging crookedly on the latrine door. He pushed the door.

'Someone inside.'

The old woman who was inside the latrine, quite indifferent to the fact that she was exposed as the door opened, calmly and leisurely shut the door again. He passed the latrine and came out in front. The breeze was nearer here. He turned his body into the breeze and stood watching the view idly.

Inside the matchbox houses there was a flurry of activity as the time approached for people to set off for their jobs. In the houses with joint families, everyone's eyes would be roving slyly, trying to spot when the bathroom and the latrine would be free for them to use. In the house opposite, in the tiny kitchen hardly a couple of arm lengths in size, there was a controlled flurry of activity as lunch was prepared and packed to carry-off to work. The children sat huddled in rows, still wrapped in their bedcovers, eyes still thick with sleep.

Chimneys, blackened with heat on the inside, were lined up in gap-toothed rows, belching out smoke. Constantly scorched by hot fumes, unable to share their woes with the chimneys nearby, they stood mute and forlorn in the open air.

Unthinkingly, he put a hand out and touched the old, yellowing wooden ladder. It had been put there so that someone could check whether the overhead tank was full or not. He started cautiously up the wooden ladder. Around the rimless top of the water tank was a small patch of space. There the landlord lay sleeping on his side in the morning sunlight. Particles of sand were sticking to his back. All around the water tank, broken bricks lay strewn. If he were to turn over in his sleep, he could dislodge one of the bricks, and it would go hurtling down. But such a thought did not seem to be disturbing the man's sleep at all. This was where he chose to sleep after midnight to catch the breeze.

On the cement roof nearby lay an old black doormat, worn out and torn. Soaking in the rain and roasting in the heat, it lay there like a piece of dried fish. Among the old useless bicycle tyres, ragged underclothes, cement rods, bits and pieces of taps, twisted aluminium antennae, and worn-down black broomsticks, the landlord lay asleep like yet another used and discarded object.

There was the sound of the bathroom door banging against the wall in the breeze. He climbed cautiously down the ladder, went into the bathroom, and sat holding on to the door for support. The awful stink swirled around him. Someone was coming up the stairs in slippers. He listened intently. He felt as if someone was watching him as he sat there defecating. His anus cringed and his whole body twitched once.

The sound and force of the bathroom door being pushed sent a shock wave through him.

'Someone inside,' he called.

'Come out quickly.'

The smoke from the fellow's cigarette found its way into the bathroom through the crack above the partly open door.

2

His trousers were much longer than his legs, and were trailing on the floor. He folded the ends over thrice. At the waist he tightened the trousers with a string. It hung in pleats like a skirt. He put on a shirt and pulled it closed. He put the stub of a pencil and a broken piece of mirror in his shirt pocket.

At midnight, some of the town buses, free of their busy schedule, were moving around with some empty seats. Bloated from their journeying, panting from their exertions and gasping for air, moaning and groaning, they went on their way. A competition among vehicles, a vehicle for every mood. Luxury cars, small cars, medium cars, the sounds of the vehicles rose in a clamour and disappeared overhead. The street reeked with the odour of petrol and diesel fuel, both in the daytime and in the evenings. Right in the middle, under the glow of the mercury lamps, lay the wide tar road stretching away limitlessly into the distance. It was as if tomorrow's dawn had frozen in fear.

The small eateries that had sprung up to give people a livelihood were busy tapping shirt pockets. However much cash they were fed, the cash boxes had their gaping mouths open for more. The sound of tinkling coins was their sign of life.

Floating hands, soiled plates—his plate too was one of them.

The hand-cart was standing there temporarily, with stones in front of the wheels on both sides to act as brakes. On the upper shelf of the hand-cart, the unused plantain leaves were lying curled up together.

He kept aside some money for the bus ticket and bought something to eat. All the people in the crowd had their eyes riveted in the direction from which the bus was expected, as though they awaited the arrival of a god. Those who feared they may be crushed by the crowds were gathering in groups, pooling their money, piling into autorickshaws and hurrying away. From one autorickshaw, the sound of taped music was blaring.

When the bus came up and stopped, he had a tough time keeping his limbs and his possessions intact. He was pulled into the bus along with the crowd, as though he was stuck to it with gum.

It was a relief to get into the outskirts of the city. He started walking along a wide bridge. As he reached the crest of the bridge, he could see a tall factory chimney thrusting up into the sky, belching out its fear in the form of thick black smoke. Like little paper houses the factory buildings were dotted around, filling up the wide acres of land. The puff-balls of

factory smoke rose upwards as if they would paint the whole sky with their blackness.

The smoke in the sky had spread over an area much wider than the factory itself. Drawing on the energy from fire, running the machines to the limits of their capacity, the factory turned out its products and sighed in satisfaction. As one came closer, the noisome odour of the effluents announced the presence of the factory to the whole neighbourhood. The breeze, swirling around directionless, spread the stench far and wide.

In trees and house verandas, on the red sand roads, in telegraph poles and in the milestones on the road, the stink of the factory effluent had seeped in permanently. The moment the distinctive odour met his nostrils, he could see in his mind's eye the scene inside the factory, with its machines.

When he reached the end of the bridge, he took the pencil stub and broken mirror out of his shirt pocket and climbed down the slope under cover of the wild bushes. Once he was sure he was well hidden, he sat down, looked into the mirror, and drew a moustache on his face with the pencil stub. He sucked in his upper lip and drew the pencil firmly across. A faint line, resembling a budding moustache became visible, and this was enough to satisfy him. He held the mirror a little away and looked again. Now he couldn't resolve the doubt that arose in his mind. Did it look like a real moustache? Or like one that had been drawn with a pencil? He contemplated his image for some moments more, alternately sucking in and thrusting out his upper lip. Then he got up and started walking.

At the main gate of the factory, the security guard in his grey uniform was staring off blankly into space. His face always wore that same expression. A driveway a bit under a quarter of a furlong leads to the front door of the factory. A few people passed by, walking or riding their bicycles.

Beyond the main factory entrance was the office building. Here a gathering of casual workers talked in loud voices. Being so used to working amid noisy machines, even their normal voices were pitched at a high volume.

There was still some time before the work tokens would be distributed. He merged into the waiting crowd. From the corner of his eye he saw the cement slab that lay just under the window. No one had moved it, and that gave him comfort. Every day, he would glance at that stone first before putting his mind to other matters. The fact that no one seemed to consider the stone to be an object at all brought him happiness as

well as astonishment. The fact of the matter was that the stone meant nothing to anybody else. But it was this very stone that had ensured him a steady job this past week. During the toilet break, he had brought the stone and placed it under the window. Only those who received a token were allowed to work. The long, snake-like queue would form in front of the window. The manager would issue the tokens through the window, standing right alongside the wall. When his turn came to reach the window, he was too short for his face to be seen by the manager. In fact, the manager would not even notice there was someone standing below the window. 'Next', he would call impatiently, thinking there was a gap in the queue. The boy would stand on tiptoe or jump up so that the manager could see him. No you're not old enough, would be the reply. No token. He would plead and beg, but to no avail.

Now he was convinced that it was his own genius that had found a way for him to get the work tokens during the past week. For the manager, it was only head-count that mattered.

Someone spotted the tall stooped figure of the manager approaching from a distance and spread the word. Everyone shoved and pushed to get into line. Because the stone was lying right outside the window, the queue was snaking away at an angle from the window. The fear was with him every day that someone might think of removing the stone because it interfered with the formation of a queue.

The manager would glance casually and disinterestedly at the crowd, and disappear into the office. He would put on airs as if he were the top boss of the place.

There was a buzz of excitement in the queue. There was much shoving back and forth. The queue looked as if it had been possessed by some spirit. It twisted and snaked all over the place with absolutely no sense of order. One moment it would break up, the next moment it would join up again, all the while muttering and jabbering '*aaai ... oooi*'. It looked like this could be the beginning of trouble.

At the factory entrance there was the raucous cawing of trouble-mongers. The manager did not hear the commotion. Tired from his walk, he settled down under the ceiling fan and tried to bring some order to the queue. From the small shop that sold fried snacks, watery tea, *pulao* rice and cigarettes and *beedis*, four fellows emerged. The sight of them created a further frenzy in the already unruly queue. They clutched one another in a tight wall with no space between them. 'Don't let them join, *doi*, don't let them come,' they urged one another. The four newcomers pushed their way arrogantly through and stood with

the others in the queue. They threw the beedi stubs on the ground. One of them slowly released the cigarette smoke trapped in his lungs and it came out in trickles through his mouth and nostrils. When the intruders pushed in, the queue became even more disorderly and wild. There was utter chaos. Struggling to somehow keep themselves upright in that pushing, shoving, ragged queue, to keep their feet on the ground and keep their places in the line, a forest of legs of all kinds were churning up the dust. The dust was rising in clouds up to knee level.

Two of the men at the back of the queue suddenly rushed forward and tried to enter the front, abusing everyone all the while. The whole crowd turned as one beseechingly towards the manager and pleaded, '*Saar ... saar.*' When they realized that the queue was not going to yield place to them, the two men charged at it as if it were a human wall, bracing themselves with their feet, and butting with their heads, churning up more clouds of dust. The queue resisted them vigorously. The boy held on tightly to the waist of one of the others and was pulled along with the twists and turns of the crowd. Once in a while, he would shut his eyes tight and scream.

Suddenly there was the sound of resounding slaps landing on someone's face. Instantly, the queue broke up and became a crowd. It was a free-for-all. All and sundry joined the pitched battle. A group that went to make peace also joined in the fighting.

Those who moved away from the trouble spot were wondering whether to form a fresh queue. They were looking alternately at the manager and at the still-fighting bodies.

Someone in the crowd picked up the stone and rolled it away from its place in the front of the queue.

Abuses were flying thick and fast. The manager went to the front gate of the factory to do what he ended up doing regularly three or four times a week. That is also what the boy had expected would happen.

The manager gathered up the tokens and flung them far away into the dust. Those who had been fighting, those who had been standing in line, those who had just been watching the proceedings, all stopped whatever they had been doing and rushed towards the fallen tokens, shouting and yelling. Great clouds of dust swirled around the patch of ground where the tokens had fallen. The boy ran and spotted two tokens and fell on top of them. Others came and fell over him.

Someone grabbed him by his feet and dragged him along. His testicles felt as if they were being twisted off. He shuddered and moaned. His genitals were extremely painful. With the force of the pulling, his

very life was being shaken and battered. When he tried to scream, something came and pressed down on his head. It was the buttocks of someone who had been pushed and flung upside down in the melee. The boy's face was being rubbed deep in the dust. As he gasped for breath, the dust rushed in through mouth and nostrils till it seemed to reach right up to his brain, setting off a cough and a stream of tears. Unable to cry aloud, he moaned and suffered. If he were to try and force his attacker's hand away from his testicles, the work tokens could slip out of his hands and be lost. So he merely twisted and kicked as best he could. Suddenly all movement stopped and he felt a sudden stab of fear for his life. He would have to try and get up. The sounds of shouting reached his ears. Someone was crying. It sounded like the lamentation of an animal. He wanted to get up and look. His lifeless arms would not work. The dust that had entered through his nostrils seemed to have reached the very core of his being and was swirling around there. His pencil moustache had been wiped off by the dust. If only he could somehow save his lifeless limbs and his genitals he could run away from there. He gathered up his strength and got up. Many of the men were moving away holding tokens and smiling smugly. He was covered in dust all over. He patted himself down, removed his shirt, and shook it out. Some of the men were still scratching around in the dust with their toes, looking for tokens. Sometimes one could be lucky enough to come across a token in this manner. A fair-skinned boy of around his own age was sitting on the stone that someone had rolled away. His chin rested in his cupped hands. Maybe he had not wanted to join in the wrestling and fighting for tokens. Once he had realized that this process of pushing and being pushed and scrabbling in the dust was the only way to be sure of getting work tokens, this new fellow too would soon be giving lessons in survival to others.

'Do you want a token?'

The face of the new boy shone with joy. The veteran of several such scraps handed over one of his two tokens. The new boy expressed his thanks in English.

The boy dusted off his clothes and took his token to the gate of the factory. The watchman at the gate accepted the token and sent him to the work area inside.

3

The moment one entered the factory floor, the sound of the machines assailed the ears with redoubled loudness. Against the cacophony of the

machines, when anyone spoke it looked as if he was merely moving his lips soundlessly; or, at most, the voice was heard faintly like that of someone weakened by severe fasting.

The supervisors in their caps were going around with their notepads, surveying everything. The workmen who were not amidst the din and bustle of the machinery were engaged in tasks that the machines had left still undone, looking like black statues that had congealed within their clothes.

He squatted in front of the underground furnace. Casuarina logs had been rolled into small piles. As the wood was thrown in through the wide mouth of the furnace, the hungry flames licked them up. Like a small piece of the fuel that was going to feed this monster of a machine, he stood bathed in the red glow of the furnace. As a supervisor had remarked once, this furnace was the life-force of the entire factory.

When those who were not wearing watches asked to know the time, there was a method of communication. Ten-thirty would be ten fingers held up, followed by a smart slap on one's own cheek. The quarter hours were indicated by counting out the numbers and then pointing to the feet, and the three-quarters involved touching the nose and the feet in succession.* This routine was a great source of amusement to the new workmen, and brought smiles to the faces of even those who were used to it.

At around noon, a supervisor arrived. In one part of the factory the toothed wheels of a machine were not rotating properly, he said. He ordered a few of the workmen to do double duty, and took the boy and some other workmen away to help with the repairs. There were already three others standing around and waiting at that factory level. They all stared at the boy.

The supervisor showed them a deep, barrel-like cauldron. A whole line of such cauldrons stood in a row. The chemical substances in them glistened the colour of honey. To the boy, the cauldrons looked as deep as wells. Even though they would not completely drown a man, the chemicals would reach up to a grown man's waist. For the boy, they would come up to his chest.

'Mm ... go on ... get in and push.'

* The reference here is to the dual meanings of some of the Tamil words involved. For instance, *arai* means 'half' but also 'slap'; *kaal* means 'quarter' but also 'foot'. Therefore, the time 10:30 would be *pathu arai* or *patharai*, which could also be translated as 'ten slaps', as mimicked by the workmen.

Everyone stared. Take off your clothes and climb in, he ordered. They took off their shirts. They glanced at one another's bare bodies. The supervisor looked at all their bodies.

'Take off your pants.'

How can I stand here and display my torn underwear, the boy wondered. The supervisor shouted at them. Soon they were all standing in their underwear like prisoners behind bars. The boy's underwear had round holes in it, and hung loosely, showing his buttocks. The fact that no one was in any frame of mind to be looking at him was some comfort.

The chemical sludge swallowed three of the men up to the waist. The boy climbed in too. It was searing hot. Under his feet he could feel the teeth of the machine wheel, as long as his forearm. The supervisor told them to step on the wheel and press their weight down on it. They all pressed in different directions. Press it in the same direction, you idiots, yelled the supervisor. All of them moved to one side and pressed together hard, their bodies shuddering with the effort. As the wheel moved up and was pressed down again, the slimy feel of the chemical liquid was revolting. One of the fellows, the fat one, spat out a blob of mucus. Surely this mucus-spitting will meet with disapproval, thought the boy, and turned to look expectantly at the supervisor, but the supervisor chose just that moment to look away. All he wanted was that the toothed wheels should start turning once more. That was the only thing in his mind.

With sweat bursting from every pore, they stood in that chemical liquid and pushed the wheel with their feet and kept on pushing. The wheel did not move. Again the jumping and the pushing. The supervisor just stood and watched.

When the siren sounded to signal the end of the working day, the men in the cauldron felt a sense of relief. The supervisor asked them to climb out. He took them to the floor where the toothed wheels were installed.

The automatic wheel was fastened by two circular metal rings joined to a slender hook. The supervisor instructed them to turn the rings in opposite directions to loosen the wheel that had become stuck.

The workers for the next shift had started coming in. All the other workers from the previous shift had already left.

Some of the chemical substance had dried on his body like a second skin and was causing an itch. They were all trying to wipe away the trickles of the chemical that still continued to drip from their skin. It was unpleasantly sticky and the boy was scratching himself.

They took a deep breath and pitted their strength against that of the machine. The machine moved a bit in response to their efforts.

But soon the hope that it would start moving smoothly on its own dissolved away. The palms of his hands had turned red. The man who had spat mucus into the chemical cauldron now spat saliva onto his palms and rubbed them together noisily as if to warm them for the coming effort. Then like a man who is about to demonstrate the feat of lifting the wheel with his teeth, he bent down and grunted with the effort of pushing the wheel. The wheel moved slightly and returned to its original position. The workman looked at the supervisor in disbelief. Everyone was looking alternately at him and at the supervisor.

'Mmmm … try again.'

'What is there to try? We have struggled with this for more than half a shift and it has not moved.'

'You can apply for overtime. Now come on … quick.'

Again they got down to the job of trying to turn the wheel. Even as his eyes took in the harshness of the scene, the thought came, how refreshing it would be to go to the snack shop and eat some fried snacks and drink some tea. He realized that the tea-boy who usually brought tea for the workmen must have left without realizing that there were people still working on the upper floor. There was a sound from behind the crowd. The supervisor climbed down and ran. The workmen began to chat. One of them sat down on the machine to rest.

Downstairs, the cleaning women were passing by, and the fat workman waved to them. They giggled and went on.

The supervisor returned. Another workman also spat on his hands in readiness to resume the work. The others crowded around him, wearing encouraging expressions on their faces. The supervisor came and took a look and then went downstairs again. Again they started chatting. In a short while, the supervisor was back again.

'You can all go. There are extra people who have come for the next shift. You fellows won't do the job. I will manage with the new fellows.'

'We haven't yet got the signature for our OT.'

'You didn't work full time. I can't give you any OT.'

The supervisor climbed downstairs and left. The workmen were stunned.

'Saar, saar,' they entreated him. He ignored them and kept walking away.

'*Ey*, you son of a whore!'

The supervisor whipped around as if someone had grabbed him with a hook and pulled. The workmen looked at him. His face red with fury, he came up the stairs. He landed a resounding slap on the face of the workman who was in front.

'Saar, it wasn't me.'

'Then who was it, da? Tell me.'

He moved over and slapped the next workman. The fat workman reached out and grabbed the supervisor's arm. The infuriated supervisor swung his left arm. That too was caught and held. The supervisor was powerless now, but was trying some bluster. The fat man looked at him impassively. The supervisor started pushing the fat workman backwards. The others tried to separate them. The supervisor lashed out with his leg and kicked the fat man. The fat man doubled over. The supervisor, now free, began to hit and kick them again. The others dragged the supervisor inside. Meanwhile, the fat workman ran in like one who has been taking boxing lessons. He punched the supervisor in the face. The others also joined him in thrashing the supervisor. The boy, totally ignorant of the internal politics of the factory, was standing by, gaping. The fat man landed a mighty kick, and the supervisor, like an old discarded rag, landed right inside the chemical cauldron. The liquid splashed out in a high spray. The boy gathered up his clothes and ran downstairs. Later he could hear the sound of people collecting upstairs to see what all the commotion was about. Swiftly he put on his clothes. Just for the sake of twenty rupees look at all the things that have happened, he thought to himself. As he fled, he was already worrying about having to come to work tomorrow. Greatly agitated, he prayed while he ran, asking god not to let the supervisor die.

4

Once he reached the bridge, he slowed to a walk. He was sweating because he had run so hard. Only then did he realize that he had left his slippers behind. Though they were old and worn, he was very fond of them. He pulled himself along at every step with his hand on the cement railing at the side of the bridge. The stink of the chemical mixed with the smell of his sweat made him grimace with revulsion. He looked at the factory. Under the blackened sky, it looked like a peaceful cluster of paper houses. Once he was in the bus, it seemed to him as if everyone was staring at him. He was afraid that the authorities from the factory would come running after the bus, climb in and arrest him and shut him up in a prison cell.

The sun was low in the sky when he arrived at his lodging. The fierce sunlight that beat down upon the walls and the roof all day would be trapped and preserved by the walls of his room all night. Even as he entered from outside, the room would pour the trapped heat on to his body. He was sweaty. He was thirsty. With the bit of water that was left in the bottle he wet his throat. He filled the plastic bucket with murky yellow water and had a bath. Then he shut the door and sat down. There was absolutely no movement of air. What should he do from now on? This was the thought that was floating around in his mind and troubling him. He felt very tired. He heard the landlady's voice as she came up the stairs calling out his name. He opened the door and peeped out.

'From this month there will be someone moving in here. So my husband said you must look for another place to stay.'

He stared in shock. He just nodded his head.

'What can we do? We took pity on you and put you up here. We even talked to the people who are moving in. He's only a young boy, we told them. There won't be any problem with him. He will even be useful to run some errands for you to the shop and so on. But who would ever agree to have a boy who is a total stranger living with them in their home? Go back to your home town. I will arrange to get you a ticket.'

He stood there speechless.

'My husband found it difficult to talk to you about this, so he sent me. I am also finding it difficult ....'

Then, as she went back down the stairs she said over her shoulder, 'It was only because you were from our town that we had you here for so many months. If you had been from some unknown place ....'

Her voice faded away as she disappeared from sight. He again shut the door. It was pitch dark. He lay down and curled himself into a ball.

5

Next morning, he opened the door. He felt as though he had shrunk to the size of a withered leaf. He gazed unseeingly at the sights of the city as though he had absolutely no connection with anything that was going on. Hunger had drawn dark circles under his eyes. Standing at the window, he counted out his change. It occurred to him that if he could

skip breakfast, he could eat at the roadside shop at midday and manage without any dinner. He sat for a long time without taking a bath.

The people who were going to move into his room came by. They had a close look at everything. The boy stood outside while they went around the place. As they left, they seemed to glance casually at him. He watched them leave.

He started walking. There was fifteen rupees in his pocket. That was the last of his money. Now he would have to look for a job and for a place to stay. At the edges of the main road and on the side-streets many eateries, with purple, yellow, and white sacking serving as canopies, were doing brisk business. In the folds and creases of the sacks, the dust of the city air had settled deep and turned them black. On top of the sack canopies were layers of fallen leaves from the rain trees. When the branches stirred in a passing breeze, the small needle-like yellow flowers scattered downwards. In the shade of the trees, the shops stood blackened by the heat of the steam. To demarcate the boundaries between the shops, there were benches or lines of cardboard boxes. The sidewalk had been taken over by the shop owners and fires were burning in fireplaces made of just a few bricks. In the heat of the flames, the bricks and the vessels had turned black. At the front of the shop, just behind the big vessel of cooked rice, a fellow stood wielding a flat rice ladle as if it were a weapon. In the intervals between ladling out the food, he played drum-beats with the ladle against the side of the vessel. He was even shorter than the high mound of food in the vessel. He stood on top of an old wooden crate, clammy with sweat. There was a constant wet patch on the floor, as if it had permanently seeped into the ground. Like a swarm of flies hovering over scraps of food, humans were swarming around the food shops, dripping with sweat, and gulping down the rice as if they were swallowing fire. In the first shop, a fellow with deep-sunk eyes was issuing tokens, standing in a puddle of water and wearing a sleeveless *banian*. The polythene bags meant for wrapping food parcels were flapping in the breeze as a man sat in front folding food into packets like a mechanical robot. He was slicing again and again into the mound of rice to break up the lumps. The lead-lined plates were glinting in their polythene linings. Even as more and more rice was cut up and scooped out of the vessel, the rice mound in the vessel grew instead of shrinking. The demand for more and more food rose in a clamour from the forest of hands holding plates. The rice would land plop ... plop ... with lightning speed onto every plate. He would pour *sambar* and *rasam* on the rice, but his action was like someone pouring tea. Voices

demanding more rice swirled around him and dirty plates were being held out. The cost of a meal was seven rupees. Pieces of brinjal and cluster-beans and a few broken bits of *dal* formed part of it. A *poriyal* made with that day's cheapest vegetable and a dirty yellow *appalam* half as big as a person's arm was 'extra' and the price was four rupees. The vehicles were speeding by, filling the air with noise and dust.

The boy handed over a ten-rupee note and bought a meal token. It was a dark blue plastic token. He waited for the change. The man said, I don't have the change right now, so go and eat and take your money later. He ignored the boy and stared past him at the street where the closely packed vehicles were growling by. Then he reluctantly fished around inside a plastic box and handed out one rupee. Take the other two rupees after you eat, he said and went back to his routine of taking in the money, rapping on the rim of the tumbler with the token and slapping it down on the counter. The tinkle of the coins and the rapping sound of the tokens seemed to be announcements that the fellow was at work.

The boy held out his token. A hand came out of the forest of hands that were serving the rice and grabbed the token. The server slapped some rice onto a plate and sprinkled some *sambar* over it. Someone's dirty plate hit the boy on the back. An old man wearing spectacles was standing in the hot sun and streaming with sweat. Bits of rice were clinging to his upper and lower lips. He smiled. The boy took his plate and moved to one side. The appalam lifted off the plate in the breeze. He was alert enough to grab it. He mixed the crushed appalam into the rice to soften it and then began to eat. He started sweating. Inside a yellow plastic tumbler was the drinking water, off-white in colour and with some pieces of rice floating around in it. The boy waited for another customer to finish with it. The water tumbler went from hand to hand and occasionally sat upon the cement counter. From inside the shop a huge bandicoot peered out. It had a body like a hunchbacked man and a swollen belly, and its fat tail looked like something out of a carpenter's toolbox. A man in the crowd, as though in shock, shouted towards the shopkeeper, 'Bandicoot! Bandicoot!' The shopkeeper retorted casually, if you want it, catch it and go. Everyone laughed.

The dirty plates were piling up at the corner of the street. A small boy was busy separating the plates from the polythene linings. He was dipping the plates one by one in a vessel of water standing nearby. The soiled polythene plate-linings lay in a heap along with the leftover bits of rice and pieces of vegetables. A bunch of crows were pecking away at

the food. The boy splashed some water from the vessel onto the birds. They made a pretence of moving away.

He asked for an extra helping. His plate was snatched out of his hand and a ladleful of rice landed on it. The man added some *rasam*. After he had finished eating, the boy washed his hands. He wiped them on the insides of his trouser pockets. He wiped his mouth on his shirt collar, first on the left and then on the right. He took two rupees out of his shirt pocket and held it out.

'Why only two rupees?'

'You owe me two rupees change.'

'When?'

'I gave you ten rupees, you said you had no change and you gave me only one rupee and told me to take the other two rupees later.'

'Mmm ....'

'I bought an extra helping.'

'Four rupees.'

'But you owe me two rupees. Now I am giving you two rupees. So it is all right.'

The man in charge of the tokens thought for a while.

'I have to give you two rupees, is it?'

'Yes.'

'If I didn't have change, I would have told you to collect three rupees together later. I would not have given you one rupee and asked you to collect two rupees later.'

'No, sir, that is what you did.'

'Master, please take care of this,' called the man.

A fat fellow emerged from inside. The boy began to get anxious. The sight of the fat man filled him with fear. The warm feeling from a full meal suddenly disappeared and he felt dry-mouthed with dread.

The fat man listened to the whole story from beginning to end. He looked at the man in charge of the tokens.

'Master, the fellow is lying.'

'No, sir, I swear he owes me two rupees.'

Someone grabbed his shirt from behind and pulled. With great difficulty the boy turned his head. A slap landed on his face. Before he could even wonder who had slapped him, the fellow in charge of the tokens kicked him in the hip.

'Sir, I swear it. He does owe me two rupees.' In the midst of the blows that were landing on him, his words came out in broken wisps of sound.

'You son of a whore! Why don't you go and beg somewhere, da.'

'No, sir, I swear he has to give me two ....' The man slapped him again on the face. The crowd scattered. A man covered in grease came up swiftly to stop the fighting. Everyone was watching the whole scene like an entertainment while they ate. The man with the grease-stained shirt listened patiently to the whole thing from the beginning. He said, 'It's only about money, right? I will give the money. Let the boy go. Go, son.'

'Why do you need to give the money, saar. Such fellows shouldn't be allowed to get away with cheating.'

'I did not cheat him.'

'Thambi, just go.'

The old man in spectacles nodded at the boy as he passed by. The boy looked at the man in the greasy shirt and said, 'Thank you very much, sir.'

The man gave him an intent look.

'It is all right. Go.'

The boy walked along the roadside, trying to choke back his tears. He came to a stop in front of a bookstore. He was reminded of his mother. Some passers-by stared at him as they went by. He wanted to get away and sit alone somewhere. Rice and sambar were sticking to his clothes. He tried to flick away the food from his clothes as he walked on.

6

He spent the whole day in the park and then came back to his room. The landlord was coming down the stairs. The boy greeted him. The landlord told him he was going out of town to attend a wedding and would be back the following night.

In the park, he had spent a long time thinking about his mother. He sat there, tolerating the sweat that broke out on his body. When he heard that the landlord was going to be out of town, the boy felt a small glow of joy. He shut the door, went up the stairs to the floor above, and started climbing the wooden ladder. As his head emerged on the terrace, the breeze pushed against him with the strength of a little child. With every step that he climbed, the breeze swirled stronger and stronger around him. He felt a deep sense of peace. When he emerged onto the terrace, the wind blew into his clothes, puffing them out and making light flapping sounds. Far below, the whole area was dark with little pinpoints of yellow light. At a distance, vehicles were going by soundlessly, as though in a silent movie. There were people

moving around on some of the neighbouring terraces. Elderly people were sitting or lying on tape cots and reclining chairs, enjoying the fresh air. Young children were running around, shouting as they played their games.

The boy removed his shirt, put it nearby, and sat down. The feel of the breeze on his body brought him happiness. He leaned against the water tank. The inner wall of the tank, with the water lapping at it, had lent its coolness to the outer wall as well. He smiled as he felt the coolness on his back. For the time being, he had forgotten all his troubles.

On the nearby terraces, the children were getting tired and dropping off to sleep. The adults, worried that the dampness of the night air would make the children ill, carried them indoors. The youngsters arrived on the terraces with their mats and pillows. Above the heads of the streetlights, there was utter darkness. The vehicles in the distance were now only a scattered few.

The boy stretched out his legs. He rolled up his shirt as a pillow for his head and lay down. He closed his eyes. The darkness closed in. At midnight he started feeling cold. He tucked his hands between his thighs and curled up. At the sound of someone knocking on the door of the boy's room, the landlord's wife came out. She saw four or five men standing there. They asked for the boy by name. She told them this was where he lived. They explained what had happened in the factory; she was shocked. The expression on her face showed her distress. They told her the supervisor had been killed. They accused the boy of being the one who had pushed him into the cauldron and then run away. 'If he tries to get away, we will inform the police,' they said, threateningly. A woman standing at the back was crying. In the light it could be seen that she was the boy's mother. 'My son would never have done anything wrong,' she was saying, as she wept.

The sounds of his mother weeping were enough to make anyone's heart melt in pity. The landlord's wife pointed up the stairs and they started climbing. His mother rushed forward and climbed ahead of them.

His bladder felt as if it would burst.

His mother was still weeping as she climbed the stairs. It was as if his racing heart had suddenly gone still. He woke up with a start. The sky was still dark with little pinpoints of yellow light. Aware of his urgent need to urinate, he got up and started moving. His body was trembling.

Suddenly he felt someone grab his ankles and pull sharply downwards. He screamed in shock and alarm. His urine splashed and splattered everywhere.

—Translated by Malini Seshadri

Ailment*

Abimani

Just as the sound of dirges erupts every now and then in a bereaved home, rain fell in intermittent spells of weak drizzle.

Manohari was despondent that Karuthayi, that wretched woman, might not turn up today as well. How many days since the latrines here were emptied and cleaned? And this cursed rain on top of that! How was it possible to stay indoors, enjoying life, with this foul damp-shit smell everywhere? If it were a single household, it wouldn't matter: we could endure it, accepting it as our damned lot. But, after renting the place to four different families ....

Waste from five different households was overflowing in the two latrines—che, what torture this life was! Where had this Karuthayi disappeared, for three whole days? Disgruntled whining from the tenant women was enough to tear Manohari's ears apart.

It was only now that 'flush-out' toilets had come to many houses in the city. Manohari, too, had been insisting to her husband—virtually standing on one foot—that somehow a flush-out should be installed in their compound very soon. Is that so easy? Could they even approach the idea without four or five thousand rupees in hand? Just the bricklayer's wages would cost them a packet. The moment I receive my bonus next month, I'll arrange for a flush-out—her husband had been delaying it on some such excuse. And this wretched rain—why, it could have held on for a month, just one more month, before coming down like this!

'Is Karuthayi's house so far away? Why can't this woman go over there and find out? How many days more must we eat right next to this foul stench?'

* Original title *Nokkaadu*.

'My husband told me yesterday—let's give it one or two days more; if the latrine is not cleaned up by then, we have to look for another house. Being owners, you will block your nostrils and stay put. Why should rent-paying tenants put up with it, as though it is our fate or something?'

Manohari was in agony as if her heart was torn up. To her the words from each tenant woman seemed to carry a foul stench that repulsed and embarrassed her. Despondent, she felt like tearing her hair, yelling, and banging her head against the wall.

'You collect the rent every month down to the last rupee, don't you? Shouldn't you show the same concern to keep your house and surroundings clean?'

What could she do? She had no other option but to listen to all the abuse coming her way. She was in so much trouble only because of Karuthayi. Where had that woman gone, for three whole days? She trudged in every day, the shit-filled iron bucket in one hand and the *thoratti*—metal rake with a crook at one end—in the other; where the hell had she vanished?

Manohari wondered fleetingly whether Karuthayi might be ill or feverish. She must be well into middle age, surely? It may even be time for her to retire. Karuthayi often turned up for work without a blouse, with no oil on her hair, and in a filthy cotton saree. Her work could not be faulted, though. She would leave only after she had washed and cleaned thoroughly, leaving behind not even a bit of dirt. She took care of most houses on that street. She would do her job meticulously, careful not to give room for any complaint to the municipality about her work. There were many people in the municipality waiting to sabotage her job. Sometimes Karuthayi too worried about it. What a lot of pressure there was in this job! She knew that if she lost her job, she could count on no other means of support. 'Only so long as a woman is good for a few rupees will her son, as also his wife and children, show her some respect,' she would often mutter to herself.

Every Sunday, carrying a brass pot and a small bucket, she visited the houses she served to receive rice and *kuzhambu*. When she called out 'Ammo ...!' from the base of her throat, the women, snoozing wearily in the afternoon, got up quickly, fetched rice in a small plate and kuzhambu in a glass tumbler, and gave it to her. Even if the pot and bucket were not filled to overflowing, her heart was still full of gratitude. 'Mavaraasi, may you be well,' she said. Nor did she hesitate to make them part with money on festival days. To her, all festivals counted: Deepavali, Pongal, Christmas, Ramzan; each festival yielded a generous amount of cash.

That pot of rice and bucket full of kuzhambu were more than enough to feed Karuthayi for four days. She could add more and more water every day, let it ferment and drink it as gruel. What could she do—when she had to share the food with her grandchildren, how many days could it last? The moment they filled their stomachs with gruel, they wiped their hands on their shirts and went their own way, leaving their grandmother hungry. Little donkeys, what on earth do they understand? Karuthayi consoled herself. What did she care, did her life depend on them? No, it was the municipality that fed her.

Whatever the obstacle or predicament she faced, she was never absent from work for even a single day; even if she was pale and distraught, she simply had to come in to work. Then, what had happened to her now? Manohari was confused, unable to make up her mind. As time wore on, she started to feel angry. Karuthayi was the reason these lowly tenant women were actually questioning Manohari! How could she ...?

* * *

'Emmov ....'

It was very late when Karuthayi turned up finally. The rain had subsided to an uneven drizzle. She hurried through it, using the front end of her saree to cover her head, her body trembling, carrying in one of her shaking hands the bucket filled with ash and in the other, the shit-smeared thoratti. Crossing Manohari's yard with difficulty, she entered the compound. The courtyard lay besieged by puddles of rainwater, making it difficult for Karuthayi to walk across.

Manohari's nose quivered as soon as she set eyes on Karuthayi. She was raging; unbearably angry.

'Come, come ... your husband allowed you out of the house only today, did he? So you saunter in here, at your convenience.'

Blazing cinders in Manohari's eyes threw sparks. The tenant women stood back, hidden by the walled-off enclosure in the backyard.

'Karuthayi, how could you do this? If you are unable to work, then you should leave the job, no? With the stench from this waste floating in rainwater, how can we eat or live ....'

The tenant women's anger had now shifted to Karuthayi.

'What do you people know, Amma—you will talk, won't you? You haven't suffered what this woman has suffered in these past three days,

have you? With this wretched rain raising my body heat, I had a bad stomach ache. I thought I was never going to get up. Even after going to the hospital and taking an injection, my bowels stayed put. It's the same even now. What can I do? The inspector says he will tear up my card if I am absent from work for four days together. And now, you people are also tearing into me— how many people should I oblige? Ladies, I don't know why death has passed me by so far.'

Like a machine that had been switched on, Karuthayi kept moaning to herself as she walked to the lavatory, which stood some distance apart at the back of the house. The sky had not cleared yet. Ten in the morning had turned into the dark of midnight.

Karuthayi came out immediately after she entered the latrine Manohari was standing in the enclosure at the back to keep an eye on Karuthayi.

'What's the matter, Amma—couldn't you store some water inside? It's my job to clean up, I know, but should I also bring the water?'

Karuthayi invoked what was standard practice in the context. Manohari must have realized her lapse only now.

'All right … don't be angry. After all, you've turned up miraculously after so many days—seeing you, I must have forgotten everything.'

Delivering that derisive taunt, Manohari strode briskly to the well. Hurriedly, she drew and filled up two buckets of water, which she carried to the latrine. Manohari was breathless from that brief burst of activity and wheezed noisily. Drenched in the drizzle, she trembled.

* * *

There were two cabins in that lavatory. Immediately after she entered the first cabin, the sound of the thoratti being dragged repeatedly and following that, of the bucket being moved could be heard clearly. Shortly thereafter, Manohari heard the sound of water being poured from the bucket and of the floor being cleaned by repeated strokes of the broom.

She was done with the first cabin. Waste water came out through the hole and flowed in what seemed like a flood. Karuthayi entered the second cabin, grumbling aloud at the same time:

'Ennamma, don't you spray ash here properly?'

Even as she kept whining, Karuthayi busied herself with the next task. This was the way she talked, without any real sting or defiance. Could she really be firm with her customers and talk angrily to them?

If she did, would they feel like being generous towards her every Sunday?

'It's all right, Amma. Don't make a fuss. Just do your job properly.'

Manohari dashed the point of her chin against her shoulder in a gesture of contempt. The tenant women who were standing on the sidelines near the enclosure at the back now broke into wide grins, baring their teeth.

Suddenly, they noticed that the sky was growing pitch dark as on a new moon day. The cold wind started to blow with an even sharper nip than before. Bolts of lightning clashed repeatedly as though sickle-knives had been flung across the sky. The sky was filled with the noise of rolling thunder. Apart from the sky, the same sound began to erupt from inside Karuthayi's stomach as well. Karuthayi had feared that this might happen. She had felt the churning in her stomach on entering her neighbour, Ponnamma's house earlier in the day. Damn, did it have to take the life out of her at a time like this? Lamenting her bad luck, she had held tight, but now it seemed impossible. All her feelings and nerves seemed to have breached their bounds and gone out of her control. Karuthayi was beginning to be afraid that if she hesitated even a bit longer, she might soil her legs and the saree she wore, and turn into a stinking mess.

* * *

Everyone needed to use it now.

'What's the matter with Karuthayi? It's been a while since she went into the second latrine with her bucket and *thoratti*; there's no sign of any movement.'

As the rain drizzled on, their minds too were spraying their own drizzle. To Manohari, it felt like the void: there was no sound of cleaning, or of water being pushed out.

'Ei, Karuthayi, what are you up to? There's no sign of any flow of waste; are you sleeping?'

There was no reply from Karuthayi for a few minutes. Only then could her voice be heard—quivering, hesitant, and feeble.

'Wait, Amma. My stomach is bursting. I'll clean it all up in the end. I'll come out just now, in a little while.'

It was with a feeling of humiliation that Karuthayi replied. That her bowels had fairly burst out of her brought tears to her eyes.

That did it for Manohari. She turned instantly into Badrakali, the vengeful goddess. All the tenant women who had been standing beside

her wrinkled their noses and disappeared into their respective houses. 'Che, look at the woman. This Chakkiliyar woman needs the latrine in our house it seems—what a disgrace!'

Manohari abruptly pushed the latrine door and went inside. The door, left unlocked by Karuthayi in her hurry, opened immediately. Anger blazed on Manohari's face like a fireball. Manohari was shocked by what she saw on entering the cabin.

'What do you think you are doing? Were you asked to clean up the latrine or to sit there yourself and foul it further? Moodevi!'

Manohari exploded in anger.

Karuthayi stood up immediately. The disturbance in her stomach had not settled.

'Anyway, I will wash and clean everything thoroughly, Amma.'

Karuthayi bent forward in a posture of humility as she replied. The way her saree and legs stank with the filth streaking down, she was overcome with revulsion.

'So what? Does that mean that you must come and shit in our latrine? Get out now! Clean everything properly and go. Or else …,' Manohari stopped just short of performing rudra thandavam, the sacred Dance of Fury.

Karuthayi was scared. She came out immediately. With the rain pouring like a waterfall, her soiled sari and legs felt even more loathsome to her. She was so ill that she could hardly walk. Her stomach was still churning. To wash the latrine and herself clean, she needed at least two buckets of water. The well in that compound was barely ten feet away.

Karuthayi picked up the bucket which was kept outside the latrine. Her hip ached and itched badly, making it difficult for her to walk even with that lone bucket. Her body was feverish and aching—as was her heart.

—Translated by N. Kalyan Raman

This Man*

Bama

There was something very odd about Kaanchaarathaan. In fact, people hardly thought of him as a human being. Up to a certain point,

* Original title *Ivan*.

Marikolundhu had been a subservient and obedient wife. Her husband would come home drunk and beat her up, and she would put up with all the abuse and take care of his needs. But finally, one day, stung by physical pain and pushed beyond the level of her tolerance, she gave Kaanchaarathaan a proper thrashing. From that day onwards, he stopped beating her. But he did not stop drinking. As for Marikolundhu, she took no further interest in anything to do with her husband, and he too did not harass her in any way.

Quite often Kaanchaarathaan would disappear mysteriously. Where he went, what he did, where he worked, where he stayed—these were all matters even his own family did not have the answers to, let alone anyone else on the street where they lived. Marikolundhu and the others felt only relief that they were rid of the nuisance of having him around. Even his two sons were concerned only about leading a happy life with their wives and families and had not even an iota of concern about their father. Those who knew how Kaanchaarathaan had harassed his family would hardly blame them for their indifference. Once in a way he would return home. They would feed him. He would wander around for two or three days before disappearing yet again. None of the adults ever gave a thought to when he might return the next time. But his two grandsons and his granddaughter awaited each of his visits eagerly. So too did all the other little children who lived in that street. In fact, it was this crowd of children who would announce his arrival to everyone in the street. 'Here comes Kaanchaarathaan! Kaanchaarathaan has come!' they would shout and their excited voices would resonate all around. They would gather around him and mob him, and dance around him and with him, and create a huge clamour, while all the adults stood around and watched in silence. If any adult were to pass a comment about him in his hearing, or laugh at his antics, he would become so enraged that he would start abusing them in language unfit for human ears. So all the adults had learned to keep quiet when he was around, or at least to pass their comments only out of his earshot.

I have no idea what Kaanchaarathaan's actual name was. Everyone had always referred to him as Kaanchaarathaan. Once when Marikolundhu was asked about his real name, she spat out this answer: 'Ha! As if he is an important collector or something …. Why do you want to ask about that fellow's name? What does it matter whether he has a name or no name at all? Why do you want to talk about someone who doesn't even deserve to be considered a human being? Talk about something else; otherwise, just get up and go!'

Her brusque tone made me feel uncomfortable. Anyway, nobody else seemed to know his real name. Some people seemed to think he was called Kaanchaarathaan because his home town was called Kanchaapuram or something like that ....

Azhudhakanni Patti said, 'Actually, that fellow is not from here, you see. It is his wife Marikolundhu who belongs to this town. They got her married to this fellow. She went to set up house with him and ended up getting kicked and beaten. She was in a miserable half-dead condition. Her father feared that she would actually die if things went on this way and so he brought her away here. Kaanchaarathaan arrived here breathing fire. How dare anyone take my wife away from me, he ranted and raved. The panchayat was hastily summoned and they arranged for the two to stay together in this town itself. They stayed on—it is now thirty years since all this happened. At least now things are not so bad—the fellow turns up here only once in a while. He wanders off somewhere or other like a *sanyasi* ... and then turns up again. He cavorts with the little children like a mad man. Anyway, his life will go by like this now. He must be fifty or sixty years old by now, surely?' Azhudhakanni Patti finished her monologue with this question.

'*Che, che*! Impossible! He cannot be that old. At most he must be only forty or forty-five. Definitely not more than fifty, anyway. But still, age has not put an end to his mischievous ways.'

Even as he was being discussed, from a distance came the sound of singing:

Daku is daku, soku is soku! Daku is daku, soku is soku

This was Kaanchaarathaan's favourite song and this was how he always announced his arrival in the street. And all the little children would stop whatever they were doing and run out onto the street singing the song and crowding around him as he sang and danced. His more-than-six-foot body looked like a long bamboo pole; his skinny arms and legs looked as if they had been tied on separately to his body, as they twisted and twirled according to his whims and fancies. His half-squatting gait, with his knees pulled up and his arms flapping like a bird's wings, back and forth and up and down, made people laugh—not only the children but the adults too. But only the children had his permission to laugh at his antics. Woe betide any adult who dared to laugh!

I stood at the doorway of my house and watched him. He finished his first song and started on the second one. Because he sang the same songs every time, all the children had memorized every one of them. The children joined him in the singing, leaping and frisking around. Some of them clapped in time to the beat as they sang, and others danced.

'The bridegroom is coming, the groom is coming. O look, in his bullock-cart he comes,' he sang, and the children provided the counter-line as a chorus, which reverberated throughout the street: 'The bride is coming, the bride is coming. O look in her bullock-cart she comes.'

And then they all sang together.

Kaanchaarathaan's grandson, Appukutty, piped up in his shrill voice, '*Thatha*!' And then he burst into song:

O rose, O princess, O beloved bird, O beauteous queen,
Can I come close? Can you ...?

Here the boy stopped singing and the other children took up the refrain and sang the song with gusto. It was Kaanchaarathaan's cue to start yet another song:

Kuvva, kuvva, paapa, ask for money for a bath,
Kuvva, kuvva, paapa ....

The children all repeated this line of the song in unison. Just then, Sundari Chithi, who lives four doors down from my house, was coming by looking for her daughter. The moment Kaanchaarathaan caught sight of her, he launched into another song:

You are but a plaything, I am but a plaything,
Come to think about it, we're all nothing but toys.

All the children clapped their hands and laughed and sang, 'Nothing but toys, nothing but toys ....'

Sundari Chithi remarked, 'Whenever this fellow sets eyes on me he starts singing this song. I've been noticing this for quite some time. He just has to catch sight of me ... and off he starts with it. I just don't know why he ....' And she called out for her daughter. The girl came running and behind her ran Kaanchaarathaan ... and behind them ran the whole bunch of children.

By now they were right in front of my house, and he started a new song:

Have heart, have virtue, run, Raja, run.
Have faith the future will be bright, be sure your time will come.
Enough of all the cringing, this life of fear is done,
Like the river tide that swells up high, rise up and start to run.

Run, Raja, run, be sure your time will come.
Over there a great big mansion, lift up your eyes and see ....
And here a humble hut of straw, as poor as poor can be.
Oh yes, be brave and virtuous, and run, Raja, run.

As he sang, Kaanchaarathaan was moving up and down the street, pointing to the humble huts and then pointing to the double-storeyed buildings, flailing his arms around. The children followed him, shouting at the tops of their voices. The whole street was filled with a cacophony of sound. And then he started on his theme song:

Daku is daku, soku is soku....

This was the signal that the show was about to end and that he was preparing to leave. Gradually the sounds of the children's shouting died away.

For some time after he left, the people continued to discuss him. Thayamma, who was Marikolundhu's neighbour, said, 'Last time, when Kaanchaarathaan came he brought a huge *hundi* box. It must have contained at least a thousand rupees. Marikolundhu was sitting on the floor picking out pebbles from the rice. This fellow came, broke the hundi, picked it up and, emptied it out on top of her head. The coins fell rattling on her head and bounced off and rolled all over the place. Anyone could have picked them up and walked away with any number of coins. Whatever money anyone picked up, they were welcome to keep, he announced. No one picked up a single coin, except his own grandson and granddaughter who ran around excitedly to pick up the rolling coins. Marikolundhu just got up and went away without uttering a single word.

'How much money did you pick up?'

'Che! Why would I touch that money! Who knows from whom he robbed that hundi box? Who knows what poor soul had scrimped and saved for a lifetime only to have this rascal loot it all. Isn't it a sin? What will be the fate of fellows like this ...?' lamented Thayamma.

In whichever house he happened to be, if he spotted something he wanted, he just took it. Everyone knew this trait of his.

For the past four or five months, there had been no sign of Kaanchaarathaan. The people of the street went about their business in peace. But the children began to miss him. When will Kaanchaarathaan come again, they asked. Whenever they thought about him, they would go around singing his favourite 'Daku is daku, soku is soku' and some of the other songs too. As more and more days passed without a visit

from Kanchaarathaan, the adults too started talking about his unusual absence from the scene. I too longed to see him again, to hear him talk. Others spoke slightingly of him, but somehow I admired him and was fascinated by him.

'Maybe he was dead drunk and got himself run over by a car or truck on the road. That would explain why he hasn't turned up here for months.'

'Oh, he'll turn up some time or other. Where else can he go? Maybe he got caught red-handed when he was stealing something. He may be cooling his heels in some jail somewhere. After all, a habitual thief is bound to get caught some day!'

'His wife and children are doing nothing about it. I don't see them going around and searching or making any effort to find him. At least they could lodge a complaint at the police station.'

But Marikolundhu said, 'It's not as if he is a small child. He will come on his own when he feels like it. By nature he is a wanderer. He comes as he likes, he goes as he likes ....'

Her words proved prophetic. Two days later, Kaanchaarathaan arrived. The whole street came to life. This time he had appeared in a different garb. Instead of his usual dhoti-shirt outfit, he was wearing a woman's nightgown. It was dark blue and long enough for his tall frame. He must have found it hanging on a clothes line somewhere and decided to take it and put it on, someone remarked. The sight of him singing and dancing in his long nightgown amused not only the children but the grown-ups too. The children swarmed around him laughing, clutching, and pulling at the nightgown, and creating a great deal of commotion.

'Hey, Kaancharathaan has become a woman, look, a female Kaancharathaan!' The children were teasing him and laughing delightedly. As for him, he was pretending to drive away the children fiercely, but he too was wreathed in smiles.

He entered his house in a nightgown and came out wearing his usual dhoti-shirt attire. He was carrying a parcel in his hand. He must have bought something on the way, people thought. He went over to the house of Mutharasi who lived nearby.

'Ae, Mutharasi, come out here,' he called. Handing over the parcel to her, he said, 'Look at what is in this parcel and tell me, is it gold or is it silver?'

'God! Whose house did you rob to get this jewellery? Some day you are going to land up in police custody. Why are you giving this to me? Go give it to your wife ....'

But even as she was scolding him, Mutharasi opened the parcel.

All hell broke loose! With a piercing shriek she flapped her hand wildly. The baby snake which had been in the parcel fell out on the street and started slithering away. Kaancharathaan ran after the snake and caught it, laughing 'Ha, ha, ha' loudly all the while. All the grown-ups and the children who had gathered around him yelled in fear and fled. He was holding the snake in his hand and playing with it. Mutharasi spoke sharply to him: 'Is there no limit to the sort of pranks you will play on people? Thank goodness it's only a water snake. If it had been a baby cobra, what would have happened by now? Am I madly craving for silver and gold? Why do you pick on me, Kaancharathaan?'

'*Ae*, Mutharasi, what made you think this is a water snake? It is actually a cobra. Want to see? Come closer.' And he showed her the characteristic 'U' mark on the top of its head. Some people had ventured closer to take a look. When they saw that he was actually holding a cobra, they moved away hastily. He opened the snake's mouth and put his right index finger in. The snake closed its mouth firmly around his finger. He lifted his hand and swung the snake around, hanging from his index finger. The snake held firm with its mouth and did not let go of his finger. Everyone stared in fear and amazement at this spectacle. Finally, he pressed open the creature's mouth, took out his finger, and bundled the snake up again in the parcel and tied it up.

'I am going to deliver this parcel to Maariappan's tea shop,' announced Kaancharathaan.

Marikolundhu had been a silent spectator at this entire drama. Now she said, 'If you give it to him at the tea stall, he may drop and break something in terror when he sees the snake. The people around will erupt in anger like a volcano. Go and do it if you want to. You will learn your lesson only if someone gives you a sound thrashing.'

Kaancharathaan ignored her completely. Still holding the parcel, he began to sing and dance. The children, who had been silent up to then, began to sing tentatively, though the fear was still there. '*Daku is daku, soku is soku*,' they sang in chorus, as they followed him.

'Kaancharathaan, ta … ta, ta … ta,' they called out. 'Next time bring a big snake, all right?'

'Ha, yes, a big snake! Bring a big, big snake and throw it in their faces! Look at them, they don't have the least bit of fear! What is it that they find so enchanting in this fellow? And he too—with all that rough talk and rudeness that he shows with all the grown-ups, he is so affectionate with these little children. Absolutely amazing!'

'You see, we are always scolding and disciplining the children. That is why, the moment they see him they feel that they can dance and sing freely. He also joins in and becomes a child himself. They see him as a child … like themselves … that is why they are so taken up by him. As for us, we find the fellow so revolting.'

'When you come to think about it, the children seem happier in his company than in ours. My little one, Nisha … even if I beg and cajole for four hours the little wretch will not open her mouth to take even a morsel of food. But if this fellow tells her to eat … like a mynah she will open her mouth straight away and accept whole mouthfuls of food. Naturally this sort of thing is very annoying, but still … at least she is eating … who cares how or why. These words from Nisha's mother Gayathri were met with wholehearted agreement.

'True, true. That fellow's got something we don't have. If only we knew what that something is …,' Ramesh's mother scratched her head in a puzzled manner as she spoke. No one had an answer. They were all left scratching their heads.

I too felt that what they said was true. Just like the children who were under his spell, I too felt waves of happiness wash over me whenever he made his appearance in the street. Sometimes I would think I understood my emotions—and sometimes I was not sure I did. I only knew that it was not only my daughter Poorni who was eagerly looking forward to his next visit. I was too.

—*Translated by Malini Seshadri*

Paychi Tree*

S. Thenmozhi

Like a black column rearing out of the earth, like a pillar left over from the Iron Age, stood a lone palmyra tree, a testimony to three generations of prayer. No sign of any spread-out hair on its head—indeed the head itself was missing, as if someone had pinched it off and tossed it away. Time, with the five elements as its hand-tools, had stripped the palmyra of its rough native texture and given it an unnatural smoothness. Was the tree alive or dead? The truth was a secret as long and dark as the tree

* Original title *Beychimaram*.

itself. Above ground, its life-force had been extinguished. But under the ground, like a vast network of roots, its *aatma* had spread everywhere. Even though it had lost every last visible trace of life, the people of Thanjavur's Karuthattaangudi Sarukkai Street continued to believe that the tree was alive. In Sarukkai Street lived some people who had converted to Christianity, seeking self-respect and social recognition. These people worshipped the palmyra tree just as devotedly as they worshipped at the church of St Anthony and St Xavier. Except in the evenings, the sun and the moon would not allow a view of the pinnacle of the tree. On this tree-top, which was immune from the gaze of the human eye, some sparrows had created a world of their own.

It was a palmyra tree, a *panaimaram*. The people of Sarukkai Street called it *paychi maram*. Ever since Amma can remember, the tree has been there. It had leaf fronds, but never any fruits, and so it had never yielded any toddy. The times changed, but never the tree. Even when I first saw it, there were a couple of fronds still left on it. In the evenings women folk would come by and light camphor to worship the tree. They would pick up some of the mud from near the foot of the tree and smear it on their foreheads and *thaalis*. Pregnant women smeared it liberally on their swollen bellies, their faces lighting up with joy when they felt the baby rolling and kicking inside them. Some day, somehow, no one knows precisely when, the remaining two fronds also disappeared, taking with them the only lingering signs of life from the tree.

Between this paychi maram and my grandfather, Colonel Sebastian, was a long-standing, intimate relationship that was difficult to understand. Thatha had served in the army. Whenever he was posted to other states or to far-away places, it was to this paychi maram that he always entrusted the responsibility of guarding and protecting his family and home. All his joys and sorrows and innermost thoughts he would share with this tree. He would sit at its feet and open his heart and talk unreservedly. He would laugh and cry and talk and scold. But no one in the village thought any the less of Thatha for this. That paychi maram is his wife, they would remark, in good-natured banter. But his real wife was Paanchaayi, also known as Mariyamma. Paanchaayi could sense that the paychi maram was thatha's closest confidante and soulmate, indeed his very life. But although Paanchaayi could see there was this very special relationship between her husband and this tree, she could not even begin to fathom the underlying nature of this strange bond.

To Thatha, the sanctum of the paychi maram was imbued with the presence of his *Aadhithai*, Eve, unclad and in a state of nature. Paychi

was a constant presence in his life. The tree was mother and friend, wife and daughter-in-law and grandchild—any or all of them. He was spiritually in thrall to Paychi. Without fetters or chains, she held him close. And Thatha was only too happy to be her prisoner. During the day and all night Paychi would go away to wander around the village. So it was only at dawn or dusk that Thatha would visit the paychi maram.

Paychi had enchanted and enslaved Sarukkai Street and its residents with her playful teasing, sense of mischief, and cajoling. Every house retained the aura of her presence. She would play hide-and-seek with the children, or pinch them to make them cry. Sometimes she would drag them away by force and leave them somewhere else. As for the adults, whenever they were at fault she would appear in their dreams to admonish them. Drunkards or men setting out to indulge in any vice would feel her warning tap on the back of the neck. Like a village deity she guarded the borders. She scared away burglars and thieves and alerted the public. If she spotted cattle-thieves attempting to steal a cow at night, she would awaken the sleeping adults or pinch the sleeping children and set them crying so that the adults would wake. She safeguarded the street against diseases and ailments. Her spirit would possess someone and demand toddy or meat or cigarettes. Only when she was granted her wish would her spirit agree to leave the person in peace. No family's curry-pots did she leave unlicked. If someone called her with an offer of a full pitcher of toddy tapped from a toddy palm, she would rush there with a gleeful grin. The manners and modesty, propriety and decorum, that were traditionally expected of a woman—all these were foreign to her. She would sleep sprawled on her back, legs and arms flung wide apart. Her clothes would be in disarray. When she didn't feel like wearing any clothes, she would just take them off with no hesitation at all. She would suckle baby goats joyfully at her breast. Whenever it rained she would soak herself in it, from the first drop to the last. She would frolic and play in the puddles like a child to her heart's content.

The subtle art of awakening sexual desire and of extinguishing it—this was something that lived and coursed through her whole body. She would not approach even herself without permission. And that was the rule for others as well. She would revel in the fine art of arousing desire, almost as if she were drawing intricate *kolams*.

At other times, she would want to do the opposite; and then her very nakedness would be the flame that would incinerate *kama* to ashes. Her valour lay quietly at rest. But when it was needed, she could stir it awake into a terrible typhoon. Into every beseeching hand, she poured

her largesse like the sea. Whatever anyone asked of her, she readily gave. And whatever she wanted, she took. What was there and what was not there—everything belonged to her. She would never weep. She would usually be found either on her feet, or crouching on her heels, or lying flat on her back. Only when she was in a serene mood would she sit cross-legged on the floor. All this was known from hearsay, from things that Thatha and the elders of Sarukkai Street said about her.

The village celebrated the presence of Vaasamba in their midst. Where she may have come from was a question that never entered their minds. Even if the question were to occur to them, it would be promptly forgotten at the sight of her and they would not think of asking her anything at all. She accepted and ate whatever food was given to her and wherever she happened to be. At night she would sleep in someone's front yard or on the *thinnai* with the others. Very often she would sleep on the thinnai of St Xavier's Church. She had a good stock of stories and songs. Like a little girl at the seaside collecting shells and pebbles, she had collected these stories and songs. When the people slept, her stories stayed in their minds and melded with their dreams. Long stories that could not be completed in one night would be continued the following night. Between the instalments of the story, everyone would go around thinking about the part of the story they already knew and speculating about the part that was yet to come. As for the songs she sang—the words soaked in emotion were woven into the rhythm of music by relationships and the sheer beauty of imagination. Vaasamba's voice was majestic and powerful. She was tall, with a good stature. Her complexion was as brown as that of a fawn. Her body had a sparkle to it. She wore her saree draped with the pleats at the waist. Her hair was so long that she had difficulty collecting it and tying it. Her smile was as bright as a freshly scrubbed brass pitcher. She would often laugh aloud.

Although there were so many houses in the street, for some reason Vaasamba chose to spend most of her time in Thatha's house. After a while she started staying on even at night. It did not occur to Paanchaayi to raise any objection to this. Besides, Vaasamba would help Paanchaayi a bit here and there with the household chores. She started accompanying her to the fields. Vaasamba would work only if she felt like doing so. Suddenly she would disappear for four or five days at a stretch. The whole village would be looking for her. But once she was back, every question that rose in the mind seemed to find its own answer and die away. When it came to dealing with men, Vaasamba was like water. When she was merely tapped by a man, she would tolerate it; but if he

were to attack she would drown him instantly in the darkest depths of her being.

The bond between Thatha and Vaasamba grew stronger by the day. He seemed to pick up some secret signal from her. In a slow and subtle way, she was making him more and more aware of her. Thatha, meekly adoring, rejoiced in her presence. Every encounter with her gave him the sense of fulfilment of a sexual union. Vaasamba was incapable of telling a lie. She spoke only the truth. Thatha did not try to restrict Vaasamba in any way. He had understood that she would never submit to being controlled by any rules. She was outgoing and energetic, or withdrawn and lethargic, all according to her own whim. But whenever Thatha summoned her affectionately, she would come running like a small pigtailed girl and stand smiling in front of him.

Quite often, Paanchaayi did not know what to make of all this. It was all a deep riddle to her. Yet, her trust in Thatha was not shaken. She did not even think of seeing Vaasamba as 'the other woman'. In the beginning, a bit of jealousy would creep into Paanchaayi's heart now and then, but each time it would fade away. Paanchaayi could sense a kind of inner glow lighting up within her whenever she looked at Vaasambi. She became aware that her own sense of freedom was breaking free of its constraints and flowing free like a river. She realized too, that joy was in full bloom in that home, and prosperity had come to stay with them. The whole household revolved around Vaasamba. When she was not there, everyone was afflicted by a searing sense of loss. She was a companion to the eldest daughter. She also helped in the delivery of two of Paanchaayi's babies. Paanchaayi was not sent away to her parents' home to deliver her babies, as was the custom. Vaasambi looked after her entirely. She stayed awake at night to look after the infants. More and more, Paanchaayi came to look on Vaasamba as the very incarnation of Mother Eve—the joyful, free-spirited Eve of the Sunday sermons at church.

She was in awe of Vaasamba's spirit of restlessness and independence … surely Eve's attributes, before God's curse came down on her. Thatha was very much aware of the situation. The relationship between Thatha and Vaasamba was a private forest, embellished with unnamed and unnameable creepers. Thatha yearned to be the foremost disciple of Earth's primordial Mother, Eve.

Vaasamba would sit down with Thatha for a game of cards, as his equal. She taught him the secret of how to drink liquor and yet not get drunk or betray the fact by a tell-tale smell. Thatha gave up his habitual

drinking, and made it an occasional pastime. She would accomplish difficult tasks faster and better than Thatha could. Thatha would often stand and stare in slack-jawed amazement at her muscle power when she hoisted and carried big sheaves of paddy in the fields. She could fell a full-grown tree with no help from anyone. Whenever Thatha went out of the village, she kept a careful watch over the family and protected them.

The days rolled by and the seasons came and went. There came a day when Vaasamba was taken unwell. There she lay on the floor. Indeed, she had always preferred lying on the floor. Thatha's universe was shaken. He was at a loss. He sobbed endlessly and hovered around Vaasamba in ceaseless circles. Five days of vomiting, diarrhoea, bleeding—five days when Vaasamba's end appeared to be approaching ever nearer. Thatha took her sufferings into his own heart, he took the excrements from her body into his own hands. He forsook food and sleep in attending to her. As if the very purpose of his existence was to serve her, he never left her side. Paanchaayi too stayed near and helped to look after Vaasamba. She could sense a flickering flame within her own self gradually fading out. When the gods were being called upon, Vaasamba appealed to Thatha to stop, by putting her hand across his mouth. She laid her head on his lap and smiled as she made a vow. 'For ever more I will serve your male heirs. My blood will be the milk that will nourish them. In my lap I will provide safety and protection to your children and your children's children. No affliction shall ever visit your family. I will ensure that they will always flourish and prosper. But if I am ever ignored or disrespected, my very womb will turn into fiery sparks and scorch all the promises to ashes.'

That night Vaasamba was gone.

Thatha and Paanchaayi saw three generations of their family prosper and thrive—children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren. When a grandchild or great grandchild, fresh from an oil massage and still unclad would come running by, Thatha would urge the child to dance. 'Come on, Paychi, dance … come on…,' he would coax, and enjoy the little one's dancing. As Thatha's family grew and flourished, the palmyra tree too flourished at the far end of the courtyard. This was the tree Thatha had planted in memory of Vaasamba. He looked after it with the utmost attention and care. He imbued the tree with the spirit of his family deity, Paychi. Gradually, the tree began to be adopted by the whole village. It became the repository of the joys and sorrows of the people of Sarukkai Street … their place of worship. As for Thatha, he shared his life and his thoughts completely with the paychi maram.

In his universe, everyone—man, woman or child—took on the guise of paychi. Only after he had seen Paychi's shadow and heard the sound of her laughter would he even light the furnace of the brick kiln. Paychi, paychi maram, and Thatha—it was if all three were fused into one.

A long, long time later, one day Thatha spread out his towel at the foot of paychi maram and lay down. A feeling of emptiness had taken over his mind and senses. His ribcage rose and fell with his breath. A feeling of unease stole upon him. 'Paychi!' he called aloud. Paanchaayi, unable to walk very well, came stumbling and staggering up to him as fast as she could. People young and old gathered around him. With no dying struggle at all, Thatha's soul separated from his mortal body. Within and without, Thatha's body bore the fresh imprint of Vaasamba/Paychi. Thatha had embraced death with a serene countenance. The talk in the village was that it was surely Paychi who had taken the form of Vaasamba and lived with thatha; and surely it was the same Paychi who had swept by as a breeze and drawn his last breath so painlessly and peacefully away from him at the moment of his death.

—Translated by Malini Seshadri

Wetness*

Cho. Dharuman

Even after a full three days the rain showed no signs of stopping. It came down in drizzles and flurries and the overcast sky was roiling and heaving with endless banks of clouds. The sun had not shown his face even once. Maybe now and then the hint of a pause in the downpour—the false promise of sunlight breaking through—but then again a spell of rain. As Kokku Thatha was fond of remarking, '*Thaayili*! What a rain! Brings ruin when it comes, leaves ruin when it goes. Like a daughter-in-law's tears for her dead mother-in-law, this rain—dreadful—that's what it is ….'

Yes, this was one such rain. All the people of the street huddled indoors. All work was at a standstill.

Thangammal sat on the floor with her legs stretched out. On her lap she had spread a white saree and was busy picking out the lice that

* Original title *Eeram*.

were crawling across it. She poked at them and snapped them to death between her teeth and spat them out. Once again she picked up the close-toothed comb and passed it through her hair to dislodge more lice. Sivakami sat on the front step staring intently at the rain. She watched as the raindrops falling on the waterlogged courtyard formed their own miniature fountains that dissolved and reappeared endlessly.

'Amma, when will this accursed rain stop?'

'Only when both you and I are dead.'

Her mother's ill-tempered reply made Sivakami retreat into silence once more. For a while neither of them spoke. Except for the steady sound of the still-falling rain, there was utter silence.

'Why do you have to be so irritable, *Ma*, as if you had just bitten into a dry chilli?'

'What do you expect, then? When will it rain, when will it stop raining, am I the *josiakarar* Keezhnaattukurichi Iyer to predict all this?

'I am not asking for any *josyam*. What's for dinner?'

'Go and scrape up a potful of wet mud—that will be the dinner for the two of us.'

Again Sivakami was intensely irritated by her mother's response. But she knew very well what to expect next if she were to retort. So she restrained herself and did not speak. Except for the sound of the raindrops, there was an empty silence. Sivakami raised her eyes and looked at her mother.

'At least you could go to the Company and ask for ten rupees as advance,' she said.

'Hah, yes, the Company! You think it is your Appa's Company and so they will gladly hand over whatever we ask? That loan I took to buy your *paavaadais*—that hasn't been returned yet. Where's the question of advance now?'

'If Appa had owned a company and lived comfortably, why would I be struggling at your hands like this now? The lucky man departed this world only because he did not want to see this wretched sight. Why are you dragging his name into this now?'

'*Adiye*, are you going to shut up this minute or do you want me to give you a good thrashing with the broom?'

'All this doesn't bother you. You're able to clench your teeth and bear the hunger and live only on water for eight days. I am so hungry ....'

'Hungry, are you? Come here, come and bite off my flesh—chew and eat.'

Sivakami rose, muttering, from the doorstep. She looked for and picked up a torn and tattered piece of sacking and a bundle of old clothes, went up the steps and lay down. The wetness of the floor, the dampness of the old sack, and the growling hunger in her belly seemed to tug at her tired eyelids. Soon she was asleep.

Thangammal shook out the cloth on her lap, drew up her knees, and reached for the fine-toothed comb that was tucked next to her big toe. She looked up and saw that Sivakami was deep in sleep.

Thangammal gazed unblinkingly at her daughter for a long while. The tears welled up in her eyes. She sobbed soundlessly. Her teeth bit down hard on her lower lip as she wept. In front of her was the plank that had been used as a pasting surface, and on top of it lay the wooden sealing stick, a stack of cards from the Company, and an old tin containing a mixture of yam flour and zinc yet to be boiled to make a paste. At the corner of the thinnai stood the paste pot, with its short-handled ladle still stuck in it. At the edges of the pot the paste had dried into big, hard lumps. Thangammal wiped her eyes with the edge of her saree. Her face mirrored the torment in her mind.

'What a wretched job! A killer of a job—better to die than to live with a job like this. If it's a coolie job in the fields they give you one day's work and then for nine days there is nothing. But even that seems better than this matchbox factory job. No sun, the boxes are still wet ... so the factory is shut. No chloride ... shut for ten days. Labels haven't arrived ... so shut. Then they shut for ten days with no explanation at all ... and then what do they say? They say the stocks haven't moved. They claim they are thinking of making a change in the size.... With all this, finally only ten days of work in the month. During Aipasi and Karthigai, virtually no work at all—during summer slogging day and night. All those thousands like us who are depending on this kind of job for their survival—a constant struggle to find enough to feed the belly and cover the body ... waiting for the release of death—what sort of wretched life is this? One must live a decent existence like a normal human being—otherwise far better to die than lead this dog's life ....'

Sivakami turned over restlessly and curled up in her sleep. Thangammal looked at her daughter and wept uncontrollably. She stuffed the edge of her saree in a tight wad into her mouth to try to silence the sobs.

'I've not yet been able to buy a good *thaavani* cloth for Sivakami to drape across her upper body. Everyone's been asking for a month now

why Sivakami isn't yet wearing a thaavani. In fact, Chinna Kanakkaan seems to have remarked that Sivakami looked like a Malayalee chick because she was not wearing a thaavani. Then everyone laughed at his remark, and Sivakami was weeping when she told me about it that day at home. Wait, let the Company reopen .... I won't rest in peace till I confront that fellow and throw some questions in his face. I will make him want to die of shame for the way he behaved. Any fellow with sisters would have better sense than to talk like that. Going around with their tongues hanging out, these fellows ... looking to see which girl is showing what ....'

The nagging rain appeared to have died away at last. Even though it was still only evening, the overcast sky made it look as if night was already approaching. Thangammal picked up a sack, folded it into a triangle and draped it on her head, and set off towards the Company. She passed the main gate of the match factory, turned into the ginning factory road, and approached the company office. She heard the sounds of movement from inside. She took the sack off her head, threw it under the sirissa tree that stood nearby, and peeped into the room. The company foreman was alone inside, moving the racks around.

'What's the matter, Thangam *akka*, why are you here in this rain?'

'Isn't the boss here, Thambi?'

'He was here a moment ago. He said he was going to the small company, he has just left.'

'There's no money for food today, thambi. So I was hoping to ask the boss for twenty rupees as advance. If you have five rupees, please give it to me, thambi. I will give it back to you tomorrow when I get the advance.'

'I swear I don't have any money, akka. If I did would I ever say no to you?'

'We starved in the afternoon also. Sivakami went and lay down feeling weak and exhausted. I don't know what to do about the night. Wherever I turn it is like hitting my head against a stone wall. The rain on top of everything else ....'

'If you have any kind of tin, bring it, akka. I will give you some flour. There isn't anyone else here right now. Go and make dosas or at least cook some *upma.*'

'But won't the flour have zinc mixed in it?'

'No, there is flour without zinc also.'

The foreman went inside and came out with a tin full of flour. He looked around furtively and then handed the tin to Thangammal.

'*Eyakka*, please don't tell anyone about this. If anyone comes to know—that will be the end of us. Even if someone asks, tell them you did not pick up the flour for the paste the other day so you are bringing it today. Don't forget to bring back the tin.'

Thangammal grabbed the tin, tucked it into the curve of her hip, and pulled her saree folds over it. She picked up the sack from where she had left it under the sirissa tree, and came out into the street. The street lights were already on.

By the time Thangammal reached home, it was totally dark. There was no light inside the house. She groped for the matchbox near the fireplace, and lit the lamp. Sivakami was still fast asleep.

'*Thaayi ... emma* ... Sivakami, get up. Come on, get up and wash your face. See, your Amma has bought some flour. Get up, my little princess.'

Sivakami awoke and sat up. Thangammal smoothed back her daughter's tangled hair and wiped her face vigorously with the edge of her saree. She ran the fingers of both hands through the girl's hair. Sivakami, now wide awake, looked up at her mother.

'The boss has gone to the small company. Before he leaves I will hurry over there and ask him for twenty rupees as advance. I will be back soon. I have brought some flour in the tin. Make some upma with it. If it gets too late it may start raining again and then it will be impossible for me to go. Come on, shake out the sack and throw it over the door. Put water on to boil. I will be back in no time.'

Thangammal picked up the head-cover sack again in case she needed it.

'How did you get the flour?'

'I had gone to the Company. The foreman thambi gave it to me.'

'If someone had seen you both, the foreman would be in trouble.'

'Nobody saw us, you fool. Don't talk so loudly. If some busybody hears you and spreads the news around, it will be goodbye to even this. Then you and I will be left with nothing—sitting around staring and picking our teeth.'

Thangammal hurried away without waiting for Sivakami's response. When Sivakami went to inspect the oil bottle, she found a glint of oil right at the bottom. The bottle was hanging by a wire from a nail in the wall and the mouth of the bottle was stoppered with a small ball of tamarind. The sight of that gleam of oil in the bottle brought an answering gleam of joy to Sivakami's face. She opened the spice box. There lay four or five onions and some pieces of pale dry chillies.

Sivakami was as elated as if her stomach was already half-full. She ran to the fireplace and reached for the matchbox to light the fire ....

Thangammal stooped to enter the house so as to avoid hitting her head. She took the sack from under her arm where she had tucked it, and threw it into a corner. She looked around, and reeled back in shock. Her daughter Sivakami lay sprawled on the floor in a faint. She seemed to be murmuring inaudibly. Around her were puddles of vomit.

'*Adiye*! You accursed girl! What have you done! What did you eat, you wretch, tell me, what did you eat ...?'

Sivakami's eyes were rolling wildy. She was muttering something, but the words were not clear. Thangammal lowered her daughter's head from her lap to the floor. She picked up the chimney-lamp and ran up the steps. The tin that she had brought home that evening from the foreman at the company, the tin that had the good flour without any zinc in it, lay untouched. She ran towards the fireplace. There lay the old tin that had held the zinc-mixed flour. Thangammal's head reeled.

'O you wretched, cursed witch, you devil, you have turned my life to ashes. *Enthaayi* ....'

The chimney-lamp slipped out of her hands. Slamming both hands repeatedly against her head, she ran out with her hair streaming wildly. There was a single pillar standing between floor and roof to prevent the sloping roof from sliding and falling. She collided hard against the pillar and fell to the floor. A loud lamentation and a heart-rending cry broke the stillness of the pitch-dark night. And a small moan. Apart from that, nothing.

—*Translated by Malini Seshadri*

The Haunted*

V. Venkatasalam

The Mind set off on its chosen path. Beyond the village, along the lake, it went, and came to a stop in Ottaiyan's mango orchard. Among the mango trees were some that stood forlorn, starved of water and withering. The sight of twigs on withered branches, dead but yet to be shed, troubled and agitated the Mind. Would there be at least one solitary mango left

* Original title *Pachhai Niraintha Manasu.*

from the second season, hidden among the leaves of some surviving tree? The eye darted here and there in search, even as the tongue, in delicious anticipation, imagined the sharp, sour taste of the green mangoes. But there was not a single mango to be seen, not even a sun-shrivelled and shrunken one on any of the trees. Frustrated, the Mind moved away to a stony hillock nearby. Still restless, it began to climb the hillock, stepping carefully on the rough surface, and seated itself on a smooth boulder at the top. The cool evening breezes and the chorus of bird calls were now soothing and slowly its agitation died down. Like a young calf let out in a green pasture after having been starved of fresh grass for days, the Mind grazed the verdant scene. Over there, just a hand-clap distance away, like enormous green mounds the forest lands rolled away endlessly into the distance. Adjoining the *kaththaazhai* fence of the orchard, the old cart-track had been encroached on both sides by knee-high tangled shrubs and had narrowed into a single-file ribbon of a road. On that ancient, worn-out track there appears a teenage girl, half-walking and half-skipping along carrying a bundle of firewood. She has gathered dry twigs for the kitchen fire at home. Now the fear of being spotted by a forest officer makes her quicken her steps. Yet she is comforted by the thought that at most she would have to forfeit only a bundle of twigs and her wood-cutting knife. A soft babble of voices can be heard from a group of girls further up the track. To the Mind, who sat and watched from the mountain, the young girl's tender breasts seem to resurrect the spirit of its childhood friend, Pachhai. A vision of her floated in front of the Mind's eye, her two front teeth showing in her familiar smile.

The solitude of that deserted forest tugs the Mind back in time. No longer does the Mind see the mountain slopes. Instead there are fields and groves and houses overflowing with harvested grains. Those were the times when the soil was rich and wet and bountiful. Flowering shrubs and plants and green creepers jostled for space, woven and enmeshed in a tangled mass of vegetation. The people started hacking at the vegetation from one side, burning it as they cut it away. They put the bigger branches aside to use as firewood, and flattened the uneven mounds of earth. The stones would come in useful to build the boundaries of the fields. Working according to their strength and ability, each of them toiled and created two or three acres of farmland for themselves. Seed bottle in the left hand and a fistful of seeds in the other—seeds flung with a rattle against the bottle, to fall in neat patterns, covered over, furrowed shallowly with the plough—that was all it took to make the barren ground fertile. The stalks of the corn plants, each as thick as the

wrists of a strong, grown man, stood proud and tall, their abdomens bloated. If you were to pick just four or five ears of corn, you could put the grain in a one-litre measuring can and it would be full to the brim. Bountiful vegetables—much more than anyone could eat. Around the overgrown and neglected chilli garden ran a pretence of a fence made of *thurinju* twigs. Along this fence, on dry stalks and withered tendrils, ridge-gourds dangled or lay long dead. One could pluck them and crush them on a stone. The dry outer skin would come off and the rough fibre inside the vegetable would be just perfect for scrubbing down the cattle. In the hot sun the animals would stand, licking their hides to ease the itch from flea-bites.

The Mind thought back to that day at the pond adjoining the fields—stepping into the water and trying to trap what looked like baby fish by pressing them against the slush and putting them into a small aluminium bowl. Suddenly a voice: 'Ayye, those are not fish, they are tadpoles.' The voice of Pachhai. That was the beginning of a lifelong friendship. Like the scents of the orchard that care not for the earthen boundaries of the fields and seek out the forest lakes for their play, the bond with Pachhai grew in strength.

In the month of Karthigai, with the grain beginning to ripen on the plants in the fields, came the smooth-talking men in khaki uniforms and shoes.

'The forests are going to be developed. It's a government order. You must surrender all your lands within three months.' The land belonged to the government, they claimed. By the time the month of *Thai* came around, the men in khaki had grabbed all the land and deprived the people of their means of livelihood. The Mind remembered that time only too well. In the next six months, the foodgrains were gone, leaving stacks of empty storage-pots. Carrying their small tiffin boxes the people had set out into the forests to work as coolies, to dig holes in the earth, and plant seedlings of thorny bushes that the goats would not eat. Instead of ploughs, they carried crowbars; instead of trowels, they were given spades. The trays of woven straw that had held the seeds gave way to iron vessels and wooden plates. The tractors would arrive and unload seedlings, and these would be placed on the wooden trays. The villagers had to carry the trays on their heads to where the holes in the fields stood ready to receive the plants. Their job was to plant each seedling carefully in a separate hole, without damaging the roots. When the Mind thought back to those days, it remembered how Pachhai, with

her streak of playful mischief, had relieved the tedium of this task. She was welcome company and her friendship was a source of comfort.

Within just two or three years, the bushes planted on the forest fringes had flourished and were displaying their needle-long white thorns. No longer could anyone identify his own piece of land—the land he had ploughed and tended as his own—because all the fields had been merged. Pachhai, who had been earning half-wages as a child worker, was now a grown woman and had started earning a full day's wages. She had started wearing a *dhavani* draped across her chest, but her mischievous nature was intact. It would pour with rain, enough to drench one's clothes through and through; and the next day the work in the fields would take on extra urgency. This had become a pattern by now. New varieties of plants, which we had never heard of before, began to arrive. Seedlings of beech trees and tamarind trees were planted in plastic bags, placed in flower beds and watered with watering cans. Pulling out and destroying the weeds that would otherwise flourish and grow wild and smother the surviving seedlings; doing 'soiler work' to loosen up the caked earth around the roots of plants; cutting trenches so that rain water could collect between the plants and nourish them—these were our routine tasks. Pachhai's job was to find all the dry spots in the field where the plants had died and to put new plants firmly into the soil. Just for the sake of appearances she would carry a few seedlings on her head as she moved along at the leisurely pace of a garden lizard. Soon she would disappear behind a rock or into the shelter of a thorn bush and there she would sit spending most of her hours. But if any officials came for inspection, she would become feverishly active like a whirlwind and win their praise. Not with the guard, Kumar, though. When he came around she would try her best to stay out of his sight and keep clear of him. Whenever he did spot her he would call, 'Ei, Pachhai, come here,' and would give her some small errand. 'Go, run and buy me a packet of Scissors cigarettes. And get back here quicker than the spittle can dry on the ground.' When she got back with his cigarettes and four or eight annas, with a nod of his head he would allow her to keep the change.

When it was time for lunch, people would start moving towards the pond. But Pachhai would collect her own set of friends and they would go off on their own. At such times, Pachhai would purse her lips and pretend to be smoking a cigarette. 'Hey! Look sharp, there! Faster! Don't ooze along at the speed of castor oil.' Her mimicry would set her

friends laughing. One day, while she was in the midst of her mimicry performance, the guard Kumar came up noiselessly and stood behind her.

Her mimicry was so good, so authentic; why then were her companions looking at her stony-faced instead of laughing merrily? Struck by a doubt, she turned, and instantly broke out in a sweat at the unexpected sight of that tall and massive figure. She swiftly picked up the wooden tray that had fallen to the ground, and fled. The next time he saw her, the guard remarked, 'Aey, so you are smart, are you?'

Once one of the women remarked to Pachhai, 'You are always whiling away your time sitting in the shelter of a boulder. Do you think you deserve your daily wage?' Pachhai turned upon the woman in fury.

'I am only licking from the riverful that is flowing here. Is that too much for you to bear, you jealous woman? When ten people turn up for work they are writing it as twenty in the muster roll. From our daily wage they are taking away one rupee per person as commission. I dare you to go and ask them about that. We have gifted away our lands to them and now for a mere five or ten rupees we are simpering at them and fawning on them. Have you ever thought about that? Actually, even this work that I am doing is too much. So just shut your mouth, akka.'

And that was how Pachhai silenced that woman.

2

There is a rumour going around in the village that the spirit of Pachhai has possessed her uncle's daughter, Seetha. They say that even the night before last, the girl suddenly sat bolt upright in bed and stared around in confusion. She then started sobbing aloud. When they tried to ask her what was the matter, she blurted out in a choked, half-strangled voice, '*Chithappa*, I am Pachhai'. Then she started striking the top of her own head hard with her hand, again and again, wailing aloud all the while. When she heard that her daughter's spirit had visited Seetha, Pachhai's mother dropped everything she was doing, sprang to her feet, hastily tucked in her saree that had become loose, and hurried there. What with all the frantic hustle and bustle, and the exchange of mutual comforting embraces and shedding tears together, wailing, 'Yammma …' the atmosphere in that house was as if someone had died.

Pachhai's father started beseeching the spirit of his dead daughter. 'O spirit, you have left us to suffer this terrible plight. What made you crush and swallow those poisonous oleander seeds? What reason did you have to take your own life, my dear one? Did we fail you in any way?'

Seetha shook her head vigorously. When she opened her mouth to speak, these words came from her lips: 'No, Appa, you did not let me down in any way. The fault was all mine.' Then she started slapping herself on the chest. Her hair came undone and fell wildly around her face. 'Ohhhhhhh,' she wailed and wept aloud.

'Let me be there the next time Pachhai's spirit possesses that girl,' thought the Mind. 'I want to fulfil my desire to talk to Pachhai once more.'

The next morning, Seetha came toward the public tap carrying water-pots to be filled. Her gait had all the characteristics of Pachhai, noticed the Mind, and felt a sense of joy at the thought.

3

Every time Pachhai makes her appearance, it is the same scene that the Mind replays. Like water spouting from a pipe, the same image jumps out and stands there in front of the Mind, laughing aloud. There was just one hand-pump for the whole colony. To the south of the village, even beyond the busy Bangalore Road, stands the *aasaari*'s house. The old woman of the aasaari's family would also come to this common hand-pump to collect water. The moment she arrived at the tap, we were all expected to remove our water-pots and stand aside to make way for her. If we delayed for even a moment, she would begin a tirade in Telugu: 'You *Maala* cunts! When we humans come, shouldn't you give way instead of standing there like pigs?'

Once she started off like this, she would not stop in a hurry. That horrible wretch of a woman would never be content with just collecting water in her pots and going back. We would be standing there getting more and more restless at the delay, fearing that we would be late for the day's coolie work. But that aasaari woman would be collecting water at a maddeningly slow rate and washing out the cement flooring under the water pipe a couple of times in a leisurely fashion. Next she would scrub and clean the water-spout. Meanwhile, we would be fretting and fuming. Till she filled each of her pots, moved them all to a neat row some distance away, picked up and tucked one pot securely on her hip and began to move away, we had no choice but to hang around idly. Pachhai could never tolerate an insult from anyone, even if the insult was not in action or word but merely in thought. The old aasaari woman's behaviour at the hand-pump was a continuing source of annoyance and irritation to Pachhai, like a speck of iron dust that has fallen into the eye.

Pachhai was waiting for an opportunity. One morning, there was a crowd of women at the public hand-pump, carrying an assortment of water-pots and jostling for space. Just then the old aasari woman was coming along carrying four or five empty pots. Pachhai got ready to execute her plan. She had already hidden a cattle bone among the overgrown weeds nearby. She now picked it up and tucked them in securely at her hip. The aasaari woman was now near the tap, and all the women who were forced to wait muttered their resentment to themselves and moved aside. Pachhai started moving as if she was going to make way, but then went and stood fairly close to the tap. As was her habit, the old woman filled one pot of water and emptied it all out on the cement floor. She scrubbed the floor and then started taking one of her filled pots away to line up at some distance. Pachhai's hands worked fast to put those fleeting seconds to good use. By the time the woman turned back again, Pachhai had shoved the cattle bone lightly up the water spout of the hand-pump. The woman placed her brass pot under the spout and started pressing down on the lever of the pump in her usual leisurely way. 'TA...NANG!' The bone landed right inside the old aasaari woman's brass pot. The woman dropped the pump lever and went around to see what had caused that big sound. Her face expressed the sheer agony of someone who has just had a spray of smoking hot oil splashed on to her abdomen. 'You wretched shaven widows! You Maalas!' she screamed in fury and, still crouching near the tap, looked up and glared at the women. She looked every bit like an evil old witch. She took the pot away to some distance and turned it over. PLOP! Out fell the bone. Everyone was trying to keep a straight face, but in their minds they were applauding Pachhai and having a hearty laugh. One of them lost control and emitted a stifled 'Ha' of laughter. And through it all, Pachhai, who had been responsible for the whole drama, stood by nonchalantly as though the scene had not even the tiniest grain of any connection with her.

The aasaari woman walked away, heaping abuses on them all the while. The explosion of laughter that burst around that water tap when she had gone—the sound rings in my ears to this day. Ever since then, the old aasaari woman stopped visiting the hand-pump at the busy hours when others were around.

It feels as if all these things happened just yesterday. It is now many years since that lively sense of mischief which was the essence of Pachhai died and became one with the earth. Who can forget the agony of Pachhai's mother then? She had poured out her anguish: 'For many

days, the girl was just sitting and ignoring everything around her; it was as if she had turned mad. We thought, the girl has been working every day in the forest. Maybe some evil spirit had possessed the girl and left its mark on her—even two days ago we visited Thimmarayasamy temple for this .... O God, why ... why did this wretched girl do such a terrible thing all of a sudden? O God, have you too gone blind ...?' As she wailed, she slammed her head repeatedly against the wall and rolled on the floor in an agony of grief. At the sight of the mother's anguish, the whole village wept for her. Pachhai lay still, as if she were sleeping deeply after a wearying day. A flower garland was draped on her lifeless body. This young girl who had recently grown more rounded and beautiful with the new life blooming within her—this once-alive dear friend, Pachhai—the Mind gently stroked the smooth, cold cheeks of the corpse and wept inconsolably.

An unfamiliar birdcall from a forest bird recalled the Mind to the present. Dusk had crept in and the crests of the hillocks were beginning to disappear into the darkness. The sharp crackle of twigs trampled underfoot caused the eyes to turn in that direction. Along the dry, dusty cart-track, with his heavy boots thudding into the ground at every step, came the guard, Kumar. At the sight of him, the Mind instinctively shrank back and hid itself. Then, with great care, it rose from the smooth boulder on which it had been sitting, climbed down the slope of the hillock, and set off towards the village. As it went along, it had just one burning wish: 'May Pachhai descend as a fierce spirit and possess every single one of the innocent, vulnerable young women in the village.'

—Translated by Malini Seshadri

On Knowing the Truth*

Ravikumar

Was it raining outdoors? Or did it just seem that way because a storm had raged and died indoors. There we sat, looking away in different directions, unable to meet each other's eyes. It felt as if the incident had taken place just a moment ago, right there in front of us. The frustration of being mere spectators, powerless to prevent it, was sheer torture.

* Original title *Unmai Arithal.*

Nobody had raised a voice to say 'stop'. Nobody had put out a hand to try to halt it. Now, sitting, lounging, lying down, we listened. Of course, we did have an idea of *what* had happened. But did we have the burning desire to find out *why* it happened? I don't know. We had listened to everything. The weeping, those voices filled with rage and fear, the swirling waves of abuse—the boiling broth of emotions .... I was drowning in that cauldron of voices.

The whole room was covered in a pall of cigarette smoke that veiled the light and gave the scene a dreamlike quality. I gathered up the papers with the written notes and arranged them. 'See whether these are all right,' I said. The words slipped out casually and floated in mid-air. The silence in the room stirred slightly and withdrew even more tightly into itself.

Let's try a song, I thought, and fished out Bob Marley's 'Legend'. I started it spinning till the lyrics 'Get up... Stand up...' came on, and then I turned up the volume. The music, with its rumble of unfamiliar western drum-sounds, shattered the canopy of silence that had enveloped everyone. Kalyani picked up an ashtray to hold the papers that were flying about. Bob Marley's song had a romantic tone to it. 'Don't give up your fight,' Marley sang, over and over.

The other day, we too had used words like these. 'We shouldn't give up, Amma, let us do whatever we can.' That is the sort of thing we said to those women. But the truth is, even then I was filled with fear. Everything around us was scorched and burned and only the blackened walls were left standing. A tamarind tree, darkened with fire at the trunk, was somehow still green on top. Every now and then, a passing breeze would waft the smell of ashes. On the other side of the road, on the edge of the lake, stood a police van. Four or five policemen were sitting in a circle playing cards.

Enter Chandra (age 27)

Chandra's house was one of the first in the street. Some of her relatives lived seven or eight houses away. Her mother's house was ten or fifteen kilometres away from hers.

'The moment the trouble started there in Chettipaalayam, my husband said they may come and start burning our houses here like they did before, so let us go away to your mother's house. I curse myself for not having listened to him. If only I had known this would happen ....' She wailed even as the words spilled out.

'They said go and hide in the school building. No one will know. And so my stupid husband went in there with the three children and asked me to lock them in from outside. O, why didn't that blind god take me away too?'

Chandra suspected that someone had betrayed them. The crowd had gathered in front of the school building and shouted out Chandra's husband's name, clamouring for him to come out. They had brought petrol cans with them. They splashed the petrol over the school building and set it on fire. Chandra's husband and their three daughters were burnt alive.

'His uncle was the one who told him to hide in the school. He must have informed that mob also. They were shouting out his name—come out, da...come out. If only the fellow had raised his voice in reply, at least the three girls could have been saved.'

Once the commotion had died down, they went and looked. The charred body of Chandra's husband lay close to the door. The three children had been huddled together inside the cupboard on the right side of the room. Clutching one another tightly, they had been roasted alive.

'Some more tea?' offered Kannan, pouring out a cup and holding it out. The tongue winces at the heat of the tea, though the hand had scarcely noticed. The strident voices in the head descend as a pain in the spine and the body twitches in a sudden spasm. Abhi lights yet another cigarette. The sight of the glowing cigarette and the ash at its tip summons up those terrible images once again. Burning pain at the fingertips. The nails, bitten down almost to the root were threatening to bleed.

Ants were beginning to visit the leftovers lying around from the recent meal. I picked up a matchstick and lit it idly. It flared into flame with the smell of sulphur and when it burnt out, the breeze swept away the wisps of smoke from its tip. Again, the suffocating odour of ashes.

Enter Meenaatchi (age 21)

'Only that morning the man had come from Madras. He was waiting at the bus stop to take a bus to the taluk office to get a certificate. Those fiends came and butchered him right there. When I saw a crowd of them coming that way, I ran and hid in the Mariamman temple on the opposite side. Before the man could react, the mob was upon him. Don't spare him, don't spare him, they yelled. I was watching through

the keyhole. He fell at their feet and begged to be spared. But those accursed fellows took turns in hacking him to death ....

Then one of them slashed the poor fellow's throat with a sharp knife as though he was slaughtering a goat. They hacked off the man's head, impaled it on the *soolam* in front of the temple like a ritual sacrifice, and went away. By the time we arrived there, the police had come and removed the impaled head. We could see the streams of blood that had flowed and congealed on the iron stake of the soolam. The dead man's name was Ramesh. He had been working in a private courier service in Chennai. He had come to the village because his parents had written to him about an advertisement announcing that it was compulsory to get a voter identity card.

Meenaatchi was his fiancée. I will marry you only after I get a government job, had been Ramesh's vow to her. Meenaatchi had been waiting for him to fulfil his promise.

Enter Anjalai (age 42)

Anjalai's husband Shanmugham (age 42) had gone to the market at Puduchathiram. Because he had been on the train, he did not know about the terrible happenings in the village. As he was approaching the village he saw the clouds of smoke and he started running. That is when the policemen opened fire on him, killing him on the spot. In their report, they claimed that he had been shot on suspicion of being a participant in the riot. Anjalai accused the police of deliberately targeting her husband. She said the panchayat president of Chettipaalayam had accompanied the police in their van and pointed out her husband to them. He had been running towards the scene of the riot long after it was over. How then could he be guilty of participating in it? The police had no reply to this.

Is there any tea left? I shake the flask to check, but it is empty. I can still vividly recall the sights that met me on that street. The wind swirling and gusting around as if the spirits of the dead were growling their protest. In front of the blackened and burnt-out shells of houses the women stood or sat and muttered and sobbed. Whom were they talking to? The spirits of those who had been killed?

'Are we going to send this report to the Human Rights Commission?'

'Let us try sending it.'

'The Commission may or may not take any notice. If we take it to the media and put some pressure on the government, at least these people may get some compensation. It will be a sort of moral support to them also.'

Kalyani had been turning over the sheets of paper. She remarked, 'But we haven't given our recommendations. How can the report be complete without recommendations? It's not enough just to record everything that happened and hand it in.'

'I don't think we can decide anything in this matter. What truth are we going to report and what justice are we going to achieve?' I leaned back, exhausted.

As we waited for the bus to come, Chandra called out from across the road; her frenzied words reverberate in my mind to this very day:

'*Ayya, maharajas*, go and put all this in the newspapers. Get medals to pin on your chests. Just leave a bottle of poison for me. I've lost everything ... everything ... Ayya ... maharajas ....'

—*Translated by Malini Seshadri*

Portrait*

Sudhakar Kathak

By the time he told her about his decision, she had already reached a state of mind when she could bear to hear it. His thoughts had already moved ahead; his mind was already on the path to his intended bride's village, to the *muraippenn* who had been chosen for him by family tradition. It seemed to the girl that the expression on the man's face said it all. She had reconciled herself to the idea that there would never be any permanency or security in her life. Suddenly, her thoughts turned to her father. Where had these memories been hiding all these days? Living with this man made me forget those old memories, she told herself. When the man stepped out of the house to leave, she came up to the doorway. On the street someone was passing by carrying goats in a wooden crate. At that final parting moment, when he was going away to his muraippenn, her mind blanked out all thoughts of the man who was leaving her. Her eyes strayed to those black goats. And her mind turned to thoughts of her father.

* Original title *Varaivu.*

Her father's job was to apply manure to plants—manure from the cattle-sheds in the surrounding villages. What he was paid for his labours no one knew; they only knew that he was forever redolent of hay from those cattle-sheds. His only joy in life was in watching growing plants put out tender new shoots. His own hut had no garden around it, but he took great care of the plants of others, tending them till they were well grown. He built protective fences for the plants with the twigs of a plant that the goats would not eat. People remarked that his work had taken over his whole life and that he had even forgotten he had a daughter. But no, he had kept aside five goats to sell for conducting his daughter's wedding.

In that whole street, she was the only girl who had come of age and was yet unmarried, and her father was very well aware of that. Yet, when traders came along and made offers for his goats, he never accepted the prices they quoted. He was always convinced that their offers fell short of what was required for the wedding of his daughter. She realized that the goats held the key to whether she would ever get married. But she also realized that if a marriage alliance was arranged for her, it would seal the fate of the goats. This dismal thought always lurked at the back of her mind as she fed tender leaves to the goats and gazed upon the hard pellets of their droppings. Every time a trader came by and inspected the goats, lifting them to assess their weight, and every time her father turned down yet another offer, the goats seemed to be none the worse for it. It was said that goats that had been handled by potential purchasers would never thrive thereafter. But these were the exact opposite. They thrived and flourished after every such inspection.

There came a day when her father was demoted from his status as goat-owner. The goats were stolen. The thief was a man who chose his own times to come and go. His usual time of arrival was after the harvest, when grain was aplenty and dinner was cooking in the homes. Having walked all day till he was weary, he would enter the village on tired legs at night. Ignoring everyone who happened to be sitting near their front doors, he would casually enter one of the houses. Somehow no one thought of him as a stranger, an intruder. He was always covered in a long, dirty blanket, and a stale, foul smell seemed to cling to him permanently. The villagers would willingly offer him a variety of dishes without his even having to ask. Sometimes, he would have collected some greens on the way, and would want them cooked for him. Sometimes he would offer these to the young women as he walked along beside them on the street, and he would sing suggestive songs to tease them:

Fresh greens are picked and tied in a bunch
Ele, my brother-in-law; yes, what is it, sister-in-law
The hunger is gnawing at the pit of my abdomen
You miserly one ....

She too had watched him singing thus. His leering grin was disgusting. He was always more than ready to talk to young women. Sometimes, the menfolk would rebuke him for his behaviour, but he was totally impervious to all criticism. The overworked village men disapproved of what they saw as his indifference and laziness. They chided and mocked him for dissipating his sexual itch.

'You aimless drifter ... you're like a bullock with no land to plough,' they would remark snidely. But he would just ignore their barbed comments. People were astonished to hear him describe how he had often wandered in places where there was no water at all. 'There will soon come a time when water will not be available anywhere,' he would declare. His listeners would huddle together in apprehension at this thought. He had won a reputation among them as someone who had actually seen date trees with his own eyes. He spoke of all kinds of trees that he said he knew well and which they had never seen in their own fields. What they remembered of date fruits and their sweetness made them more than willing to believe him. One day, late in the evening when the winged ants were already flitting around, he happened to meet the girl's father in the street.

He said, 'What are you going to do with that girl of yours? Preserve her in a pickle? Why don't you get her married to me?'

The father replied angrily, 'You rogue! Can't you behave with some decency?'

'Decency? From a prick like me?' retorted the fellow cheerfully and went on his way.

That was the sum total of the conversation that evening. Who knows what was going on in the fellow's head? Some time in the night, he stole the goats. When her father asked where the goats were, the girl said, 'I had tied them up right here as usual.'

The goats were nowhere to be found. A feeling of utter sorrow and despair seemed to have penetrated deep into her father's body and taken him over. His plans and dreams for his daughter's wedding now lay shattered. His face was ashen, like that of a corpse. He lost all interest in food. He even lost all concern for the plants. The manure that he was supposed to apply around the plants lay in unused piles. In the village cattle-sheds where he had worked regularly to collect manure, no one

else came forward to take up the job. With no manure to nourish them, the plants were short and weak-stemmed. People even stopped buying seedlings from him. Not a single pit was dug for a sapling in any garden anywhere in the village.

The girl could sense her father's immense sorrow every time he looked at her. She could see that he was agitated at the thought that the marriage plans had to be abandoned. She was determined that he should resume his work of applying manure for the plants and looking after them. She decided that the only way this could happen was if she removed herself from his presence so that he would not have to look at her and grieve all the time.

Early the next morning, even before the first splashing sounds of cowdung-mixed water on the street, the girl came out of her house and past the front yard where there were no longer any goats but only the odour of goat droppings. She thought no one would see her go, but she was wrong. Two people did see her. One was the *vettiyaan* of the cremation ground and the other was the watchman of the watermelon field. As she went past the cremation ground she was walking rapidly. The sound of her footsteps crackling on the twigs below the banyan tree caught the attention of the vettiyaan. There was smoke rising in front of his face from a half-burnt corpse. He waved away the smoke, and caught sight of her hurrying away down the slope. He would tell her father what he had seen.

The girl had respect for the vettiyaan, because he was known for his sympathy towards women. That he was a man of honour was known to everyone—even to the burning, blackened corpses. On one occasion, a woman had gone to another village to work for daily wages during the harvest season. She was given her wage in the form of unripe paddy mixed with chaff. When she asked the supervisor to pay her with the proper measure of good grain, the man was enraged. He stripped away the single garment that was covering her body, leaving her naked. So she took whatever coolie had been given and made her way homewards, hiding and crouching and crawling in the cover of the dense lentil plants or the screwpine bushes. But when she got near the cemetery, it was all open uncultivated land with no plants or bushes to hide her nakedness. The vettiyaan could not bear to see a woman in such a plight. He unwound his own dhoti and threw it to her. But he himself was not wearing even a loincloth. So when he came into the village to announce that he had finished digging the grave for the corpse that was due for

burial that day, he was wearing nothing but a belt fashioned from tree twigs with leaves of creepers densely strung on it in the front and rear. When the rich young women, flaunting their jewels, laughed at him mockingly, he ignored them. He was the kind of person who would waive his payment if the corpse was that of a destitute. These qualities of the vettiyaan set him apart from others. That was why he was given the honour of lighting the first offering of camphor to the deity before the *kaavadi* procession set off on *uthiram* day in the month of *Panguni*, while everyone else, the very rich and the not-so-rich, were passed over for the honour. The people did wonder that a mere vettiyaan commanded such respect.

It was the vettiyaan who broke the news to the girl's father that he had seen her leaving the village. Just then a man passed by after attending a pre-wedding *pandakkaal* ceremony and receiving the auspicious offerings of fruits and betel leaves given to the guests. The father realized that it would never be possible for him to conduct a pandakkaal ceremony for his own daughter. He wept at the thought. Only then did people realize that he was capable of tears. He was a strong man in every way. Though he had no one to share his bed at home, he had not frittered away his hard-earned energy on consorting with mistresses. But now his very life force seemed to wane. In front of his house, with its simple adornment of a pumpkin creeper on its tiled roof, he rolled on the ground and sobbed in grief, dampening the ground with his tears.

Apart from the vettiyaan, the other person who had spotted the girl as she left was the watchman at the watermelon field. He had been alert that early dawn to make sure that no foxes came and damaged the plants and fruits. Though he had eaten nothing the night before, the conscientious fellow was awake and singing a *themmangu*. The birds perched in the branches of the sirissa trees must have wondered at the sounds of a themmangu emanating from the orchard at that ungodly hour, and decided that the voice did not deserve a chorus from them. The birds were silent. In that deep silence, the watchman's voice soared upwards and pervaded the orchard, caressing the outer skins of the growing watermelons. That was when he saw the girl pass by. He had a fleeting urge to pick a couple of the fruits and offer them to her. But he hesitated at the thought of what would happen if two fruits were found missing on his watch and the nasty way in which the orchard owner would scold him .... 'So fruits are missing, are they? Go and send your wife to my bed.'

Now that his daughter had gone away, the father did not even feel like lighting a lamp in the house. Darkness had taken over the place. The earthen lamp in the small niche in the mud wall stood waiting for the touch of her hand to set it alight again.

Now her days and nights were speeding by in a blur, leaving her no leisure even to remember her old life, how she and the other young women of the village had gone to the pond for a bath—tucking their garments firmly above the breasts and smearing themselves with home-made turmeric paste. Her feet had developed the travel itch and had brought her to this big city. The constant coming and going of crowds was an unfamiliar experience for her. Perhaps this is the *pathinettaam perukku* crowd, she thought to herself, but her mind faltered in confusion. Where was the river bank? And why were the young women bare-necked instead of being adorned with bridal thaalis? Suddenly she came out of her reverie and became aware of her sharp hunger. She stood and looked around uncertainly. At the corner of the street, a man was sitting next to a pile of chrysanthemums, stringing them into garlands. This was the first time the girl had ever seen a man stringing flowers. A cart with sacks of foodgrains went by and grains were spilling out onto the street from a hole in one of the sacks. The man got up in agitation and left his pile of flowers. He hurriedly picked up the grains that had fallen and ran after the cartman to return the grains to him. The odour of wet paddy fields reached the girl's nostrils, along with the scent of chrysanthemums. The man was advising the cartman that this variety of paddy was unsuitable for cultivation here. He seemed to be having an animated conversation with the cartman about different kinds of paddy. As she watched him, all the sounds, the shouting and the din, retreated into oblivion. And in that one moment she became utterly convinced that her life would henceforward be tied inextricably with his, like flowers on the same string. When he caught sight of her standing there, he seemed to understand her situation instinctively, and was considerate and helpful. He gave her some cooked rice to eat, serving it on one of the leaves in which the flowers had been wrapped. He looked at her, or rather at her body, and spoke even before she could ask him anything. There was concern in his voice as he said, 'A young woman with an attractive body like yours will not last long here.' The confusion and uncertainty that bloomed in her eyes prompted him to decide that he must somehow ensure a livelihood for her. His was a generous spirit and he would quite often give away his flowers free to women and children. He took her with him, knowing full well that it

was an inappropriate thing for him to do. He could think of no other way to safeguard her livelihood. With a tinge of guilt in his voice, he explained his reasons to her.

Paint pots and artists' brushes were lying around everywhere in the studio. A deep red, the colour of the red earth she knew well, was the most prominent colour that met her eye. As she gazed around at the paint-pots, she willed her mind to blend with that riot of colour. All around stood canvases bearing painted human images. The artists looked at her silently, as though they had forgotten how to speak. When she was first asked to pose for them, she felt somewhat shy and ill-at-ease, but soon a numbness took over all her emotions. She stood there nude. The rounded ripeness of her figure seemed to mesmerize them. Her silence and the faraway expression in her eyes bemused them. She seemed to have entered a personal zone in which she was unaware of her own body. They did not sketch her face. Instead they painted her figure, her body. When she turned to leave, she found that some coins had been pressed into her hand. She had been used to bartering grain for other goods; she had never handled money before and did not know what to do with it now.

The flower man was the only person she felt close to. She was determined to win him over. She stayed with him, in his house with the green creeper growing over it and its veranda strewn with flower petals. When he realized that she was drawn towards him, he said firmly, 'I already have a bride, my *muraippenn*, waiting for me.'

These words that he had hastily uttered, perhaps to avoid raising her hopes of a relationship with him, lay curled in a corner of her mind. Yet, his presence did banish the loneliness of her days. His intended bride had bound him to herself in mind and thought so closely as to leave not even a sliver of space for anyone else to come in between. Once in a while he would set off on a visit to his muraipenn's village. Every time this happened, the girl felt as if the sun had just that moment dropped out of the sky. The muraippenn would stroll with her intended husband through the banana orchard and into the shade of a clump of bamboos, and there they would kiss. When he described this to the girl, she would ache to savour such a kiss if only in her imagination. It must have tasted like the most tender and juicy palm fruit, she would sigh to herself. In the course of such thoughts, she began to feel a deep frustration and a sharp animosity towards the muraippenn. In her mind, she abused her, 'You loose woman, you man-stealer.'

When he left after a visit, the muraippenn would send with him some curds and moulded jaggery in a new earthen pot bought at the roadside. Knowing how fond he was of bananas, she always had a good stock of the *poovan* variety of the fruit in the kitchen.

When she offered him the bananas she would say casually, 'Look, these are smoke-ripened.' She took delight in feeding him things and watching him eat.

The girl began to feel that she was inferior to the muraippenn in every way. But when she came to know that the muraippenn had such a generous heart that she would distribute an extra measure of grain as daily wage to the farm workers without her mother's knowledge, she started to feel less hostile towards her. When he offered her some of the moulded jaggery that he had brought back from his visit, she would tease him, chanting:

Sugar from my athaan's house,
Let me taste a little too ....

The muraippenn leads a sheltered life, thought the girl. She doesn't have to submit to being an artists' model. She doesn't have to pose naked. But the very next moment came a contradictory thought. If the muraippenn ever had to pose for a painting and if the artist were to say 'Remove that hair,' someone like her would never have the resilience to bear it. This thought gave the girl a feeling of self-esteem.

The man had said no flowers were available that day in the city and he would have to go away to get some. When he left, the girl felt as if everything she possessed had also gone with him.

That day, as she posed, she watched the painting taking form on the canvas. They had painted her breasts to look like two inverted coconut shells. They had also painted her nipples the colour of dried raisins, emerging from dark flat circles. They had painted intricately the cleft in her body, with the faint line resembling the break-line in a cashew nut. It seemed to her that the paint brushes that painted her nakedness were entering between her thighs, violating her. She felt as if she had lost her virginity. They had even copied the dark areas at the sides of her thighs. Like a tree stripped of its bark, her body was exposed to view. The keen glances of the artists reminded her of vultures. Wingless, ugly vultures. A thought flashed through her mind—if only all these attractive curves of my body could disappear and leave only flatness. If I were suddenly to grow old and grey, they would stop painting me, wouldn't they?

As she struck the poses they demanded, her mind's eye imagined the painted canvas rising in the air and flying away. Nobody in the city would even notice it flying overhead. But when it flew by in the force of the breeze over a village, it would attract people's attention. The farmer woman on her way to the fields with her seed-box would spot the flying canvas and be so startled that she would drop the box. In a seaside village, a fisherman returning with no catch and an empty net would see the canvas. A youth in a nameless village would see it flying overhead; he would run and fetch a nameless musical instrument from the alcove under the eaves of his house and blow into it, and its plaintive notes would spread her sad story to the very edges of the universe. A weaver working at his loom would see the flying canvas and the picture painted on it. He would whip the half-woven fabric out of his own loom and leap up to try and cover the image on the flying canvas. But the canvas would want to explore the length and breadth of the sky. It would keep flying onwards. A puppeteer, conducting a show for a small audience, would imagine that a stream of spittle was emerging from the flying canvas and that drops of spittle were landing on every watcher's face. He would abruptly wind up his show.

As for the muraippenn, there she sits waiting at the edge of the blackgram field, holding a freshly plucked sheaf of ragi. Her man would soon come and she would feel intense joy in just pointing out to him the dew drops on the grass. The muraippenn would not see the painted canvas flying by.

The girl is half fainting as she stands posing. She can now see that the painted canvas has not taken off in flight after all. It is still very much here, attached firmly to its frame. Along with her utter exhaustion comes a sharp feeling of revulsion. The artists glare at her accusingly because she is staggering and cannot maintain the pose. Before they can open their mouths to admonish her, she tries to lean against the wall behind her. That stone wall is capable of offering her temporary support; but as she leans towards it, the distance between wall and body seems to stretch ... and stretch ... and stretch ... endlessly.

—Translated by Malini Seshadri

EXCERPTS FROM NOVELS

Unlike the poetry and short story selections, these excerpts drawn from fictional narratives of Dalit writers in Tamil, cannot explicitly be traced to the resurgence of Dalit consciousness that marked the 1990s. Even the canonized autobiographical work by Bama, *Karukku*, published in 1992, was not specifically an outcome of the Dalit activism of the time, though it thrusts the dynamics of Dalit identity into high visibility and fuelled it. On the other hand indeed, Imayam's *Koveru Kazhuthaigal* (1994) received serious criticism for invoking sub-caste differences and thereby threatening to subvert (possible) Dalit solidarity as was envisaged in the 1990s. This may help us understand how the pendulum of Dalit politics oscillates between identity politics and a self-critical examination of it.

P. Sivakami, Cho. Dharuman, and Poomani who had already published significant novels, did not claim the 'Dalit' tag. However, their writing received attention in the 1990s for their significant departure from the existing modes of representation (both the realistic and the so-called modernist or the postmodernist) and for their focus on caste in Tamil society. The later novels of Sivakami, Imayam, and Dharuman, while continuing to resonate to the beat of the Dalit sensibility, go beyond conventional Dalit identity politics.

While Sivakami has highlighted the issues of Dalit feminism, and Dharuman has drawn attention to structured caste-based violence, Imayam focused on the interface between caste and peripheral societal issues such as prostitution and folk rituals. Alongside these, Azhakiya Periyavan's *Thagappan Kodi* and Raj Gauthaman's three-volume autobiographical narrative (*Siluvairaj Carithiram*, *Kalasumai*, and *Londonil Siluvairaj*) emerged from an inspiration gained from Dalit identity politics. The world represented and seen in these fictional narratives, operating within and yet beyond Dalit identity politics, gives a 'generic' status to these writings, distinguishable from mainstream fiction by virtue of its focus on voices, characters, and situations that revolve around the theme of caste in Tamil society.

Owl: White and Bright*

Cho. Dharuman

Muthukkaruppan and Mookkan could hardly contain their jubilation. Their desire, their dream of many days, was about to be fulfilled and they were in a festive mood. Already at dawn, while the sky was still streaked with black, they were beating their *vaittis* clean upon a big rock at the washermen's ghat. 'White and bright' they dressed themselves and set off.

Men and women were already on their way to attend the mourning ceremony at Melapatti, streaming along the footpath like a row of ants. Some of the women had veiled their faces and bore on their heads boxes of woven palm-fibre filled with rice-grains to put in the mouth of the deceased. As they walked along the canal bank, between the rows of toddy palms, the shapes of their shadows could be vaguely perceived frolicking in the water.

Kaakkaiyan, who had left the path to 'sit' in the ditch for a bit, saw the two of them standing on the washermen's rock. 'What's all this soaping and scrubbing? Looks like you've taken quite a nice bath! Is it a funeral or a wedding?' he remarked, rising from the water in the ditch and knotting his loincloth tight around his waist.

'Is there a law saying "No soaping before going to a mourning"? Are you telling me I should go about like you, looking like some fellow from an oil-mill, in a sticky *vaitti* stinking like rotting reeds?'

'All right, all right, come however you want to, but hurry up .... Already the people from our village have left, haven't they?'

'*Elei, Kaakkaaya*, you go on with the rest. We'll be coming slowly, sooner or later.'

Kaakkaiyan ran off down a side-path to join the others.

The sun had begun to give off a kiln-like heat. Having bathed pleasantly in the cool waters of the washermen's ghat, they set out, holding their wet vaittis above their heads like fluttering tents, the breeze wafting through and caressing their cool torsoes. In a short while they

* Original title *Koogai—Vellaiyum Chollaiyum.*

both wrapped their vaittis completely around themselves and walked on, the cloth feeling like a cool poultice on their now heated bodies. Flock after flock of cranes rose up like soaring kites from the tapioca creepers spreading on both sides of the path where they had been hovering, pecking at worms with which to stuff their gizzards. Close to a thousand flew up, the first of them turning into dots in the far distance.

At the bend of the brackish creek, in the shade of a *manjanathi*[*] bush they wound their now-dry vaittis around themselves. 'Listen, Karuppa .... We just go there, quickly ask about the death and leave. Or they'll complain that you went to your big brother's wife's place, or you went only to your wife's sister's place .... That will spoil the whole plan—it'll vanish from the palm of the hand and never get to the mouth!'

'You keep quiet now, and come, 'pa .... Just for formality's sake, we show our faces and then we move out towards the west.'

'Teeth shouldn't even touch cold water .... Stomach must just stay empty as a hole—nothing in it but a killing hunger.'

'Right! Three quarters of a rupees, isn't it? No joke, is it? If already you've drunk any water, the food on that three-quarter rupee leaf'll just go to waste .... There it'll be in front of you, and all you can do is sit there staring up at the roof-beams ....'

'I'm saying there's another snag. Listen, suppose there's a red chilli in the *kuzhambu* or the *koottu*[†], watch out for it and don't eat it! You eat it, and ... finished! The spicy-hot taste will yank out your tongue and make you drink more and more water till your stomach gets all filled up. Then all you can do is pay up and walk out.'

'All cool and calm we are going to sit down there. And then only we will eat. Why any hurry? If it takes the whole day today, let it be! When are we ever again going to sit and eat in a "club"?'

'That's it! And you don't go and tell anyone, or the job will get all messed up. If anybody asks, we should just say we're going to Koyilpatti on some other business and quietly slip away ....'

From the house of mourning came the faint thrumming of drums. They reached for the shirts that they had carried all this time slung on their shoulders and put them on. In the distance were some men, standing around in a group. One was squatting on the ground, next to a can of arrack. The path they had to take lay alongside.

[*] Indian mulberry.

[†] *Kuzhambu*: lentil and/or tamarind gravy to eat with rice; *koottu*: side-dish of vegetable stew.

'Ei ... Karuppaa, we'll go around the bank to the south side and get to our street. Those lords there, at the arrack place, if they catch sight of us ... finished! Buy us two glasses 'da! they'll say. Saying "No!" isn't possible ... if we say "No!" they'll drag us into some useless fight. And on top of that, if there's a little peep or squeak out of us, they'll say, "Then we'll buy you some! Drink up! They'll say!" And then if we say "Okay!" they'll say, "Go on drinking, don't stop until it's gone to your head!" Why go and buy trouble like that—it's a devil!'

'What you say is quite right. We can't go crazy like that fellow Kaaliappan who acts like a spirit's got into him, can we? If we do that, they'll say "Put down all your money and get out!"'

'Which Kaaliappan?'

'Our Pig-Gut Kaaliappan.'

'From which village?'

'Some place he mentioned, it's right here in my mouth but won't come out in a hurry .... Just like this time, our people were going to a *thutti*. There, lying right across the street was a piece of cane, you see—and a fellow stepped over it. Some kind of magic it must have been, crossing that cane, because four-five fellows who were lurking around hiding there came rushing out and grabbed him. They all surrounded him and picked a fight. "You have to answer for crossing the cane before we'll let you go," they said. "Otherwise we will cut off your arms and legs!"'

'If a cane is lying across the path, what else can they do but step over it?'

'Stepping across that cane is the same as stepping past them, it seems.'

'Then?'

'Then what ...? Thirty rupees he had in his bag, and they grabbed it and chased him away, empty-handed. That was the poor fellow's coolie-money for all his work making seed-beds. Just for nothing, he lost it. Went mad with the shock.'

'Fellows who do no work at all and catch and snatch like that will never come to any good.'

'We fellows will be drifting around saying such things—but fellows like that are doing very fine. What rings they wear! They put gold chains on their wives' necks—bunches of them! What do they ever lack?'

'Don't talk like that. Some day or other their sins will catch up with them.'

Going south they turned into a narrow lane between the houses to reach the house of mourning and came to a stop under the tented *pandal*

that had been put up for the occasion. A man stood ready to receive the condolences they offered, with their hands folded in a *kumbidu*. The pandal was spilling over, with people coming and going.

Catching on quickly when Mookkan flashed him a wink, Muthukkaruppan quickly moved with him to the edge of the crowd, towards the west.

They were spotted by Mookkan's brother's daughter, who had been married into Melapatti village. She came running up.

'Chinnayya, come and eat! Anna, you come too, 'nga. At least one mouthful you must eat before you leave.'

'No, 'ma, we're both in a hurry, we have to go back home. Work is just lying there. If we reach in time we can at least do it tomorrow.'

'Whatever wasn't done today is gone anyway, you can't go and do it now. At least have a bite before you go.'

'No, 'ma, I'll come some other day, when there's more time.'

'Then, at least have a sip of coffee before you go, won't you?'

'Coffee we've just had. At the thutti... .'

'Is this any way to behave, as if someone is pouring boiling water on your feet! Can't catch up with you! You won't eat even a mouthful of rice, you won't drink even one gulp of coffee ! As if we are your enemies ....'

'Now go on, 'ma. No chance of all that, today ....'

'Chinnayya ... Tell Chinnamma to come one day, 'nga .... But don't tell my Ayya anything about it.'

With Mookkan walking ahead, Muthukaruppan followed close behind. Once out of sight of the village, they climbed down into a stream and crossed over to the opposite bank. Muthukaruppan pulled out *mochi* and *tulasi* plants growing along the shore and stripped off the leaves, pressed them to his nostrils, and drew in their fragrance. *Agathi* was growing wild at the edges of the fields, scattering its white blooms. Between raised borders which stretched out like two thighs grew a garden of chillies. As they walked by the side of the canal and turned to look back at the way they had come, they heard the gardener shout.

'You! Where do you think you're going? What's this new path?'

'You're one of us only, 'ya. We're on our way back from a thutti at Melapatti.'

'If you went to the thutti why not return by the main road? What business d'you have on this path?'

'We thought we might just go across to Koyilpatti from here.'

'Okay, okay .... Just don't step on the chilli bushes, the branches will break. Go through the canal.'

As they walked on, Mookkan muttered, 'What a wretch I am—might as well be dead, having to sneak around like this just to go and eat at a "club"....'

'What to do? Any time anything can happen ...' Muthukkaruppan said, 'Could be our unlucky time—some fellow spots us and it's all over .... If he goes and tells the wife, that's all. Can't be any worse luck than that. Fine life we've been living! Three-quarter-rupee "club" food it wants, no? She'll give me a whack with her broom! '

On the Koyilpatti bank of the canal they stopped at the waterwheel. Frothing at the mouth, the panting bullocks hurried to empty the water into the dipper to the loud creak of the pulley. Two mynahs had blocked the channel to have a bath, plunging their bodies wholly into the water, with only their heads stretched out. Mookkan watched them shaking themselves, the water glittering in the channel like a shower of lights from a sparkler. Catching sight of the pair of them, the mynahs shrilled in unison and flew off.

Planting their feet across the channel to stop the flow, they washed feet, hands, and faces and wiped themselves dry with their towels, before setting off once again down the tarred road. A dense growth of tamarind trees on both sides cast a soothing, blossom-spattered shade. Past the bazaar to the south, in front of each shop in the row adjoining the bank of the stream, were large round trays piled high with mounds of boiled *mochchai* pulses. Black, white, and round mochchai, *mung* beans, fried *sundal* of lentils, chickpeas, flat-beans ... there were many kinds. People sat or stood around eating. Before each shop stood the owner, shouting out his wares.

'Ayya ... come here, 'nga, Amma, come here, 'nga ... granny! Come here, Paatti .... Here, taste some .... If it's good, buy it, 'nga!' The shops were thronged with passers-by putting out their hands to receive the proferred morsels. Following Kaakkaiyan's directions, Mookkan located Nachiyaramma's 'club' shop. Sitting at the till, just as he had said, was the bald-headed Nayakar. And running in and out, back and forth, fair of body, bright of face, with an ever-present laugh spilling out of her—there 'She' was. Nachiyaramma herself.

Nayakar welcomed them both. A meal was just three quarters of a rupee and the board said, 'Unlimited Meal'. Which meant that the food

was not measured out, you could eat as much as you liked. Each of them bought a meal-ticket. They stepped inside, gently placing one foot in front of the other as though entering the womb-chamber of some holy shrine, till they stood within at last, in an attitude of trembling adoration.

A decision had to be taken at once: Should they take their seats on the bench? Or should they sit on the floor? It was Mookkan, who in an act of blind courage first advanced and seated himself on the bench. Dining next to him sat the possessor of a big moustache. He gave them a peculiar look and turned away.

A plantain leaf was laid in front of each of them and water set down. Mookkan winked at Muthukkaruppan, murmured something. Having served side-curries on the two leaves, Nachiyaramma went inside to fetch the rice. By the time she returned there was no sign of the curries. Then, in the time it took her to serve rice and pour sambaar over it Muthukkaruppan rolled himself a quick ball and gobbled it down. Curry-rice-sambar, curry-rice-sambar, curry-rice-sambar .... Nachiyaramma couldn't keep up with dishing it out. From his seat at the till, Nayakar watched it all.

For the very first time in her life, Nachiyaramma got really angry. Almost choking with fury, she seized the pot and banged out a heap of rice on Muthukkaruppan's leaf.

'Looks like Amma's very irritated about serving us!' remarked Mookkan. 'We've only given three quarter rupee, isn't it, so she's careless about serving ... thinks by just banging the pot on the leaf, we'll get scared off .... But today we must take this Nachiyaar "club-shop" in hand, show them what we can do .... Don't get up! Loosen your waist-string ....'

'Nachiyaaru ... should I give them another meal-ticket or not?' queried her husband.

'Enough of ticket! You take down that board first! Put up one saying, 'Limited Meals only'. Four more fellows like these and we'll have to shut down the hotel and go beg on the street with a skull-bowl.'

'It's not free, 'ma ... it cost a whole three-quarter rupee.'

'Devil's got hold of Nayakar! Does he listen to me? "Whoever comes must be fed till the belly is full! To serve only enough rice to leave a belly unsatisfied is a sin," he goes on saying, and so these wicked fellows have polished off everything, thrown down the empty pot, and gone off ! Even for me, not one mouthful is left!'

Walking briskly, with long strides, was impossible for either of them. By the time they managed to trudge up to the Owl-Shrine banyan and sat down under it, their heads were splitting with the heat of the noonday sun. Cascading from the tree's crown in matted tangles, the rootlets dangled like earrings.

If the rootlets are locks of hair, where's the head? Is the tree the 'head'? Or is the 'head' itself the tree?

In the cool shade of the banyan, with full stomachs, and fatigued by their walk, with the afternoon sun ushering in a mellow breeze, their eyes drooping, they spread out their upper cloths and laid down their heads. Above them were the red berries of the banyan, thick on every branch. Like drops of blood. Like red stars .... On the ground were fallen yellow leaves. Mookkan and Muthukkaruppan lay there, with their faces up, in a blissful sprawl.

The hanging rootlets rustled against their faces, swaying with the wind. What was each rootlet's quest, as it groped towards the ground? Was it striving to pierce the earth and get across the wind-borne message of the tree? Or was it the earth's missive that the wind was conveying, by way of the branches, right up to the leaf-tips—was this the magic it wrought? If that were so, had the snores and sighs of Muthukkaruppan and Mookkan reached the sky by now? Was this thunder a snore? Was the storm a sigh? Did the birds which lived in the branches and built nests there know that the silence of the rootlets was a lie? That it was their bird-song that travelled through them and made the whole earth throb?

The banyan, along with its roots and its rootlets, floats in the sky, with Mookkan and Muthukkaruppan perched on its topmost branch. Everybody is standing on the ground below and craning their heads to peer up at them—Big-house Reddiar, Chenthoorpandiya Thevar, Somasundaram Pillai, Akkayya Nayakar along with the rest. The banyan soars above their heads. Mookkan gazes at all of them and waves—no one waves back. Suddenly a whirlwind blows in, turning the hanging roots into monstrous gnarled trees, and the tendrils into enormous pythons, who snarl at him with mouths splitting wide open .... And suddenly overhead there's a star-burst, like a shower of fragrant blossoms from the world of the gods.

As a kick from a leather-shod foot descended on him, Mookkan's eyes sprang open. The village watchman, Muthaiya Pandiyan stood there, with his lathi. Scrambling to his feet, Mookkan stood up, with humbly lowered head.

'Ele! you two! Where've you been?'

'Went to a thutti at Melapatti and came back, *saami*.'

'Afternoon itself all your street-people who went to the thutti have come back. Why only you two took so much time, 'le?'

'We both went to Koyilpatti, "saami".'

'What business have you got in Koyilpatti!'

'....'

'You going to talk, son of a bitch, or shall I break your ankle?'

'We went to eat at the "club-shop".'

'Big lords! Washing vaittis and shirts all white-and-bright, sitting on bench just like others, and eating "club" food, no?'

'I'm asking you, no? Are you going to open your mouth and tell me, "'le, you son of a little bitch?"'

He aimed a kick straight at Mookkan's stomach, struck Muthukkaruppan on the shoulder with the cane, jabbed him in the stomach. Falling on the ground, they both tried to fend off his blows, howling loudly. From the far side of the banyan grove old Seeni sprang up and came running. He threw himself down at Muthaiya Pandian's feet, burying his face in them. Encircling his legs with both arms, he lay face down on the ground. The other two rose and joined him in clutching Muthaiya Pandian's legs and lying prostrate before him.

'Dirty stinking fellows, it's club-food you're asking for, 'le ? And on a bench you want to sit, eating food in style, on top of it!'

'Whatever it is, saami, these fit-to-spit-upon fellows have done it ... but you must please let it go, saami ....'

'If you wanted, you could have taken your rice-pot and got it from there, then sat under a tree and eaten it, couldn't you?'

'Saami ... excuse them just this one time, saami ....'

'Just wear "white-and-bright" and you'll become high-caste, or what? But it's already written and stuck on your face: that you're nothing but outcaste fellows .... My uncle from Kayathaar specially sent a man to find out which place you fellows were from.'

'Anyway, this one time excuse them, saami ....'

'Let go my feet, 'le, get up 'le, you stinking fellows .... Just because Seeni is asking, I am letting you go, otherwise I would tell the whole village and get you tied to a tree and thrashed .... Strip the skins off you!'

Muthaiya Pandian shook his legs free and strode away in a northerly direction, towards the village of the leather-workers.

—*Translated by Vasantha Surya*

Events*

Bama

There's a little girl Maikkanni who lives in the house next to mine. A bright-eyed child, smart as anything. She is eleven years old, but is so small and shrunken, if you saw her you'd take her for seven or eight. She is the eldest child in their house; there are five younger children—three boys and two girls.

I have known Maikkanni from the day she was born. Her mother and I are the same age. Only two years after her mother came of age, she ran off with Maikkanni's father. Those two had known each other for a long time. But neither of their families wanted them to marry; so one day they went off together to another town and returned home some days later. After that, they were happy until Maikkanni was born. Perhaps she was born unlucky, who knows, but soon after that her father became friendly with another woman, and now he wanders between two wives. He comes home whenever he feels like it, and goes off again, leaving her mother with a child in her belly every time. Now she's pregnant for the seventh time. After this one, she says, she'll go in for birth control.

So far she has put off sterilization because it would stop her from doing the heavy work in the fields. If she is laid up, the children will just starve to death. They are still quite tiny. She says she can have it done now, because Maikkanni has grown up a bit, and can go out to work.

Maikkanni's real name is Seyarani. But nobody ever called her that. Her eyes look beautiful, as if they are outlined in *mai*, and that's why her name became Maikkanni. Her face is as sparkling as the clear running water in a stream. Her eyes always seem to shine with light, at any time. The women of our streets used to say, 'If this child had been born an upper caste, she would have been even more smart. Even now, what's missing? When she comes off age, the boys will be fighting each other to snatch her off.'

The day Maikkanni learnt to walk, she started to work as well. Her mother has to go out to work in the fields. It was Maikkanni who looked after all the tasks at home.

From the time she woke up, she sprinkled the front yard with water and swept it, and then carried on with all the housework: swept the

* Original title *Sangati*.

test of the house, scrubbed the cooking pots, collected water, washed clothes, gathered firewood, went to the shops, cooked the *kanji*. She did it all, one after the other.

Whenever her mother has a baby, Maikkanni goes off to our neighbouring town to work in the match factory because her mother cannot go to work in the fields then. At that time, they managed entirely on what Maikkanni earned. I used to feel really sorry for that child because she worked in the factory all day, and then came home and did all the housework as well. But do you know, she used to say, 'Who does my mother have, except me? My father has left us. I must see to everything.' So responsible was she.

After she delivered the next child, the mother would go back to her work in the fields. Maikkanni then stopped working in the match factory, looked after the children, and did all the housework. I used to fell so sorry for her. She's such a young child, I used to think, yet she raises the little ones herself and does everything in the house besides.

Whenever she had some free time, she always came to my house. I could have listened to her all day without getting bored, as she chattered away. And when she rocked the baby in its cradle and sang lullabies, her voice was good to hear, as clear as a bell. Her mother had a good voice, too.

She always called me *Perimma*, mother's elder sister. Once I asked her, 'Ei, *tha*, Maikkanni, which do you like better, working in the fields or working at the match factory?'

'I prefer working in the fields, Perimma. But there's just one thing I like about going to the factory?'

'And what's that?'

'Shall I tell you? I like going in the bus to the match factory. It's the first time I've had a chance to go in a bus. And have you seen our bus? It's "super"! You know the Marudai bus that sets off at morning, at cock-crow? Our bus comes here even before that. And our bus is even bigger than that Marudai bus.'

She spoke as if that factory bus was her very own. 'If you are going to the fields, you can even set off after daybreak. But if you want to go to the match factory, you must set off while it is still dark. Otherwise you won't find a seat on the bus. And if you are even slightly late, it will go off and not wait. If I miss the bus, my mother will kill me, she'll beat me so hard. So even if I feel so sleepy I can hardly open my eyes, I get up all the same, pour some *kuuzh* into a container, and run with it.'

'Your mother was saying that you get a pain in your guts from working in the match factory.'

'Yes, Perimma. The stink from the drugs they use pulls at my guts. But what to do, I must work there until I'm a little older. Then I can start working in the fields. If I go to the fields now, the landlord refuses to let me work, because I'm too little. But you'll see children working in the match factory who are even younger than me.'

For Maikkanni, going to the match factory every day was like making a trip to the town. Somehow she managed to earn forty to fifty rupees a week. Every Saturday she brought her wages home and handed it to her mother. Once, though, her father waylaid her as she was coming home on a Saturday evening and left her in a flood of tears.

Later on she herself came and told me all about. 'Perimma, my Ayya beat me today because I took a rupee out of my wages and spent it. You see, today all the other children bought and ate ice. They call it cone-ice or something? That ice man is a funny fellow, Perimma. He pulls out a golden brown cone smartly, fills it with ice cream as white as white and as smooth as smooth like a kuuzh made of raw rice, and then hands it out, one at a time .... It's as sweet as anything. You know the brown cone thing under the ice, you can eat that up as well, in the end. At first, I didn't know how to hold it and to eat the ice cream. But I watched what the others did and learnt to lick it and eat it. If you had seen me you really would have laughed! I wanted to laugh, myself.' The memory of that ice cream and how she had eaten it made her forget even her father's blows.

'How did your Ayya get to know that you had spent a rupee out of your wages? Why did you have to tell him?' I asked her.

'He comes here every now and then to make trouble for my Amma or myself, Perimma. He went and checked out the notebook in which they note down our wages and found out how much was due to me. My Ayya went to school up to the fifth class, no?' She spoke of him with some respect.

But her voice sounded weary when she spoke again, after a while. 'I don't know whose face I saw this morning when I woke up, Perimma; it's been blows and scoldings all day.'

'Why, child, what else happened today?'

'I was the first one to climb into the factory bus this morning, so I rushed to find myself a window seat. But the boys from Kakkalayakkudi, who arrived after I did, pushed me away and grabbed all the window seats. They always insist on sitting there.'

'And did you just let them get away with it?'

'I called them all sorts of rude names and said I wouldn't move. But those horrible boys just pulled me away and took my place.'

'And is this why you are saying your whole day went wrong?'

'No, it wasn't just that. First the *maistri*-Annaacchi beat me in the factory and now my father has just beaten me!' Her eyes filled as she spoke and she lifted up her skirt to wipe them. I was very disturbed to see this.

'Why did the maistri beat you, child?'

'He beat me twice, Perimma. The first time was when I was sticking the matchbox labels and he saw me throwing away two labels because I had used too much paste. He gave me a sharp knock on my skull. My whole head felt as if it was spinning. I'm only small, can I stand it when a big man like that hits me? You tell me.' She rubbed her head.

I was troubled to see her like this. At an age when she should have been running about at her own will like a little calf and playing games, here she was, putting up with all this.

'And why did he hit you the second time?'

'Oh, the second time? Halfway through the morning, I was desperate to "go". I did as I usually do in our village—I went under a tree and wiped myself under a stone. Someone seems to have gone and complained to him. That's why he beat me then, just for shitting outside.' She was quiet for a while. In spite of herself, her eyes streamed. Once again she wiped them, and told me, 'I wake up at cock-crow, get ready and run, Perimma. I really don't have time then to go out. So far, I've never had to "go" during factory hours. I just control myself until I can come home and go into the woods here. But today I just couldn't hold out. That's why I went outside.'

She looked woebegone as she told me all this, but suddenly she had a smile on her face. She asked me, 'Perimma, shall I tell you something?' Without telling me what it was about, she began laughing so hard she could not carry on. Even though I hadn't the least idea what it was all about, I couldn't help joining in.

My mother who was listening to all this interrupted us, 'Silly girl! Look here; tell us about it and then laugh.' But by this time, even she couldn't help laughing.

Still laughing, Maikkanni came close to me and whispered, 'In our factory, they've built a special room which is the shit-room. It seems you must go and do your number one and number two only there.' She burst into loud hoots of laughter. Listening to her, we too had to fall about with giggles.

It was Maikkanni who brought up all the five children who were born after her; her mother delivered them into the world and could do no more. Just as soon as one child began to walk, she was ready to deliver the next.

Returning home from the factory one day, Maikkanni came to our house in a great state of excitement. 'Perimma, have you seen the movie *Vira*? The one in which the "superstar" Rajnikanth acts? Today they played songs from that film in our factory the whole day. Do you know how wonderful they are? They make my mouth water while I listen.'

'Are they as good as pickles or what, to make your mouth water like that?' I asked her. 'So they play songs at your factory, then?'

'What do you think of our factory? Every day they play new songs. We listen, and we work fast. That's why. In maistri-Annaacchi's room there's even a fan. It twirls round so fast. There's a fan in the room where we work too. But it doesn't go as fast. We don't get any cool air at all.'

My mother commented, 'So what else do you want? They seem to have given you every comfort.'

'Oh no, Paatti, it's all rubbish; you can throw all that on the rubbish heap! If you had been there yesterday, you'd have seen a real fight going on. All the children from our streets refused to work; we even picked up our tiffin carriers and were ready to walk out.'

'Why, tha, what did they do to you?'

'The children from some other village called one of us from our streets—Bernath's granddaughter, that is—a paraiya, and abused her. When she told us about it, we all stood up and started shouting back the rudest words we knew. We were prepared to fight each of them to death and we told them that. When the maistri saw what was going on, he pleaded with us to stop it. But did we do that? Never, we said, and we picked up our carriers saying we were prepared to walk all the way home if we had to.' Maikkanni smiled with pride.

'So when did you stop, finally?'

'We gave up at last because of the look on that Annaacchi's face. The whole day he pleaded with us, let it go, Amma, please let it go. He said if they ever abused us again, he would deal with it himself. So at least we stopped our shouting.'

'Who were those other children, anyway?' my mother asked her.

'I don't know who they were, Paatti, but most definitely they were not from the paraiya community.'

'How can you be so sure about it, that?'

'You see, our children always walk with firm strides. Just you watch those other—they go bending and swaying.' She left us after that and went home.

I turned to my mother and remarked, 'Such a young child and she talks so smartly, doesn't she, Amma?'

'But did she tell you what happened last week when she went to gather firewood in the *karuvelam* woods?'

'No, she didn't!'

'It seems she and four or five others went into the woods to gather those thorny twigs. It seems there was some fellow standing there, who called her to one side.' As my mother began her story, Maikkanni returned with a younger sister on her hip.

'Here she is herself. Why don't you ask her?'

When I did so, Maikkanni went on with the story. 'Yes, Perimma, we went there and began gathering twigs. That man called me and said there was plenty further along within the woods. We all began to set off there. At once he told the others to stay where they were and said I alone was allowed to go further into the woods. I was wearing a skirt that someone had given me, in a thin material, and I had nothing on underneath. I said to my friends, this man seems to be a nasty fellow, up to something or other. They also advised me, "Don't go, that, why is he asking only you to go there?" So we gathered together all the sticks we had collected and just ran away from the place as fast as we could.'

Reflecting on all that had happened to this child at such a young age, I was filled with pain on the one hand, and wonder on the other. If she was required to work far harder than her years demanded, she also behaved with a commonsense far beyond her years.

* * *

In our streets the girls hardly ever enjoy a period of childhood. Before they can sprout three tender leaves, so to speak, they are required to behave like young women, looking after the housework, taking care of babies, going out to work for daily wages. Yet, in spite of all their suffering and pain one cannot but be delighted by their sparkling words, their firm tread, and their bubbling laughter.

—Translated by Lakshmi Holmström

DRAMA

Citing evidence from ancient Sangam literature, epics scholars like Karthikesu Sivathambi pointed out how drama in ancient Tamil society was not a distinct literary genre as it was intertwined with the tradition of song, dance, and other ritualistic performances. Modern theatre movements in Tamil Nadu invoked this history of Tamil culture and absorbed elements from theatrical experiments of other cultures. Dalit theatre emerged as a response to such developments, incorporating the unrecognized folk performance traditions, and fused them with aspects of the 'invisible theatre', 'theatre of violence', 'native theatre', and 'feminist and black theatre'. This section contains two excerpts from theatrical texts: *Thodu* by K.A. Gunasekaran represents the male voice and *Cheriyin Thalattu* by M. Jeeva, the woman's voice in Dalit theatre in Tamil. While Dalit theatre draws upon myriad influences, it is not imitative of any of them. Its distinctiveness lies in (a) stylizing existing ideas and (b) weaving in the angle of human rights with a view to exposing the nature of the caste-based violence faced by Dalits.

Performances staged as 'Dalit theatre' may be classified under two broad categories: those by activist-playwrights who stage their performances in the Dalit cultural festivals (modelled on the Black Cultural Festival in the USA), and those performed in academic forums such as seminars or meetings on Dalit issues and by the students/scholars of the Department of Theatre Arts in colleges and universities. The Dalit Cultural Festival, which was conducted first in Pondicherry (1992) and then in Neyveli (1993), has become an annual event conducted by the Dalit Resource Centre in Madurai. This has created a space for recognizing Dalit artists/activists and helped the growth of Dalit theatre. The impact of Dalit theatre and Dalit cultural festivals can be seen in the theatre activities in Tamil Nadu commencing from the 1990s. Interestingly, the act of drumming the *parai* has been incorporated as part of theatrical performances, challenging its perception as a demeaning occupation of a particular caste group.

Othikai Kazhai Kuzhu's *Samban* and Vilimbu Natakak Kuzhu's *Vathai* are some of the significant productions that have been performed by these activist theatre groups. The activism-aesthetics nexus that is characteristic of these plays, and the cultural and social context in which they are performed, make Dalit theatre an art form that is radically different from any other.

Touch*

K.A. Gunasekaran

An earthen pot filled with sand is placed centre stage. By the side of the pot, four staffs, each the length of a tall man, are planted in the ground as if they represent the four directions.

A sad song in the background. Four people stand right up front on the stage in a row with their waist robes undone and held in front of them like curtains to shield their midriffs from the gaze of the audience.

As the song progresses, the four actors silently make their way to these four corners (representing the four directions) their faces turned away from the audience. At this point, a woman is seen kneeling in the centre covering the mud pot with her long hair. As the song nears its end, she slowly raises her head and looks at the audience, a look of anguish on her face. The song ends as the audience is anxious to know what she has to say.

WOMAN: Oh my people! Born to me! My mind is now stricken by agony as never before. My people live with no peace of mind. And what progress can we think of when there is no peace of mind? That's what causes this mental anguish. So many children have played happily in the lap of this mother and gone their way. (*Scoops up and scatters the sand from the pot.*)

People from Greece came. Then, from Rome. Later, the Dutch, the French, the Portugese, so many ....

The British came and considering this to be their own land, played around a bit and left. Greater than the mental suffering I endured when all these people came here, is my hurt now, about the way the real owners of this land live without any peace of mind.

(*The woman rises and walks towards the audience with the mud pot held high and sobbing inconsolably, her face covered by her hair. Sunk in thought for a while, she turns and moves towards the western corner of the stage and turns the face of the actor there towards the audience and caressing his head*

* Original title *Thodu*.

says: 'Some of the people parted ways, heads turned away and ahead.' *She repeats this and then moves towards the actor standing on the opposite side saying*: 'The ones with aggression on their shoulders have parted in another direction.' *She then touches his shoulders to turn him to face the audience.* 'Losing the valour that made them slap their thighs and take vengeful vows, a once heroic people now stand turned in another direction.' *She touches the actor standing in the northern corner and stands in front of him as if pleading for justice. Then, looking at the audience, she comes forward again and says*: 'criss-crossing these lands … toiling all the time … these people have become dark skinned, it was their sweat that turned the forests and the hills into farming lands … now they have been swept aside in another direction.' *She touches the feet of the actor as if pleading and stands in the southern corner. Now returning to the centre of the stage she resumes her earlier posture. The sad background song picks up again. As it progresses, the four actors in the four corners move to the front and stand in a row forming a curtain. Behind the curtain, the woman at the centre leaves the stage, leaving behind the mud pot.*

When the music changes, the four actors, who formed the curtain, now spread their robes in the air and flap them like wings and tying them once again around their waists perform a heroic dance. Their steps now match the pounding of the big drums. When the big drums fall silent, the smaller ones start up and a music similar to an ox-cart in motion commences. Now, the actors raise the fours staffs representing the four directions and holding them start performing cilambattam* *with elaborate steps and gestures and proving to the audience that they are not exhausted. After the dance, they form a tower-like structure with their staffs and freeze. When the drums fall silent, the flute picks up. The four actors start moving in a circle without breaking the tower structure as if overcome by the music of the flute that comes blowing in the wind.*

The smaller and bigger drums start sounding along with the flute at which point the actors start waving their staffs around to show their courage in battle and when it ceases, they resume the tower-like structure.)

ACTOR 1: (*Coming forward to stand facing the audience*) My thatha was a mighty man … an expert … he was a matchless dancer.

He looks at the other three. They laugh mockingly.

* A form of martial arts, popular in the villages of Tamil Nadu.

ACTOR 2: (*He gestures them to stop*) You know me? My Appa taught cilambattam to all the people in this area.

(*He looks at the others as if to challenge them. The three hoot and laugh mockingly once again.*)

ACTOR 3: (*Swirling his* cilambu *forcefully in the air and slapping his thigh, brags*) If I announce who my father is, everyone here will be awe-struck!

(*He strikes a gallant pose twirling his moustache. The other three look at him and laugh, ridiculing him.*)

ACTOR 4: (*He laughs dramatically like a stage-hero*) It was my ancestors who invented cilambattam.

(*The other three laugh at him.*

Then, all the four, anklets jingling, make their way to their corners and freeze.)

ACTOR 1: (*Pointing to the mud pot at the centre*) This pot … this mud pot … does any of you dare touch it?

At this the others are enraged.

ACTOR 2: You have mocked my valour.

ACTOR 3: Who do you think you are speaking to? You have ridiculed my whole ancestry.

ACTOR 4: If I touch this pot, will you shave off your moustache? Will you take a vow that you will never touch this cilambu again? You shouldn't show your face here again. Will you swear? Will you?

(*At this question, the sound of flute music comes blowing in the wind. Exactly like the darkness setting in at sundown, when they hear the flute, their body language starts to show their increasing distress. As if stricken by a great mental anguish, energy drains out of them and facing their directions they slowly collapse on the stage. The flute music ends.*)

ACTOR 1: (*Coming upstage and looking at the audience*) These people who bragged so much cannot even touch this mud pot. This is a story you know. A story that is repeated in the villages day after day …. It is getting late. Time to go to the fields for work. Let me take your leave.

(*Saying this, he picks up the mud pot and leaves the stage.*)

A song picks up in the background. Something that means, 'The peanut prices have gone up, Karuppayi .... I'll make a pair of ear studs for you!' *and listening to it someone is tilling the field. Two actors are the bullocks and they are harnessed to the yoke and plough formed by the staffs while the farmer does the tilling.*

While ploughing, the actor suddenly looks up at the sky as if he finds the sun unbearable. He shows signs of a seizure; and limbs flailing about, collapses to the ground frothing at the mouth. The bullocks move aside.

A passer-by sees this and panics. He studies the scene carefully and runs around calling out for help.)

Anyone there ... anyone? Ayya is having a fit. Please come and hold him down ... save him ....

(*He realizes that help is not forthcoming but hesitates to touch the quivering body himself. After a moment's thought, he unties the plough from the yoke and makes the man on the ground grip it. The quivering slowly stops and he watches while the man slides into a faint. He turns away and bows before the ancestral God in his mind. He scoops up some mud and smears it on the man's forehead like sacred ash. Then, releasing the plough from the man's hands he calls him,* 'Ayya ... Ayya!' *He looks around for anything that might help. He spies the mud pot on the stage. He steps forward to pick it up, but hesitates to touch it. Then, he picks it up and brings it to the man and splashes water from it on his face. The man revives and now asks for water. He raises the man's head to lay it on his lap and offers him the water from the pot. Thirst now quenched, the farmer becomes more conscious. The man who saved him asks,* 'Ayya ... Ayya ... how are you feeling now, Ayya?' *Slowly the farmer understands in whose lap his head had lain. As reaslization dawns he moves away abruptly. Agitated that the unthinkable had occurred, he raises his foot and kicks the man who gave him water.*)

Why did you touch me?
Are you allowed to touch me?
Why did you touch me?

MAN: Ayya, you had a fit and fell unconscious. I thought you might die ....

FARMER: So, what if I died? *Why did you touch me?*

(*He rises and tries to hit him on the head with the pot. Only when he raises the pot, he realizes that this is the pot that has been touched by the other.*

He drops the pot and picking up the plough tries to hit the other with it. Because the plough too has been polluted by the man's touch, he throws that away too.)

FARMER: How can I show my face to the villagers now! They will mock me for being polluted. Why did you touch me? Don't stand here. Go away!

(*He throws a fistful of mud at him.*

When the man goes away, the farmer wails, 'A low-caste fellow touched me...a low-caste fellow touched me.' *Crying thus, he caresses his bullocks and calls them endearing terms like,* 'My beloveds, my precious ones.'

The bullocks bellow. Then all of them bellow in one chorus. The bellowing chorus becomes a comical orchestra. Laughing together, they place the mud pot in the centre and start moving around the pot with the raised staffs maintaining the appearance of a tower. Flute music fills the air.)

In the fourfold system
We are not humans
Worse than dogs we are
We don't live here
Outcastes we are.
We have no relations here
Outcastes we are.
We have no rights here.

(*These words resound in the background. When the song is over ...* ACTOR 1 *comes towards the audience. The other three follow him. The sad song heard at the beginning of the play now picks up again.*

The four stand facing the audience forming a curtain. The woman is now back in the kneeling position with her long hair hiding the mud pot. When the voices and the notes from the flute mingle to make a sad composition, the four walk towards the four corners representing the four directions.

The music stops.)

WOMAN: (*Raising her arms*) Oh, my people! I will rejoice only on the day you unite.

ACTOR 1: Our people turned the forests into settlements ... into cities ... they harvested gold from the fields. The same people are now roaming

around like refugees with no place to live, with no mat to lie on, no means to study.

Touch a goat.
Touch a cow.
Touch a dog.
Why, touch even a pig.
But can you touch another human?

Even today, there are villages where you cannot use footwear—where you cannot touch even a glass tumbler of tea.

(*Then he announces to the audience that at least now, here, everyone can touch each other. The actors step forward, mingle with the audience and each starts to touch the other, on their shoulders, arms, hands.*)

—*Translated by Ravi Shanker*

A Village Lullaby*

M. Jeeva

(*The play begins with music marking festivities. People are assembled on either side of the stage celebrating the village festival. A girl in the crowd to the right starts dancing to a song. The entire group dances. Close behind them is a man showing off his prowess with a staff in his hands.*)

GIRL 1: (*Sings*) He is prouder than the wild dates
The Young Karuppayya … thannane.

(*Chorus joins her with the refrain* 'thannane … thannane …')

(*Challenging them, the girl in the crowd to the left gestures to her group and they also start singing and dancing. Close behind them is a man showing off his prowess with a staff in his hands.*)

GIRL 2: (*Sings*) He is prouder than the jambul plums
The Noble Karuppayya … thannane.

(*Chorus joins her with the refrain* 'thannane … thannane …')

* Original title *Cheriyin Thalattu.*

(*Both the groups reach centre stage jubiliantly to face the decorated earthen pot held aloft by the upper castes at the centre while the two men of valour from the two groups raise their staffs and try to break the pot. Finally, one of them manages to smash it. Immediately, the upper castes mark his forehead with sacred ash and tie some bands on his staff and annoint him as the village sentinel. He triumphantly celebrates his annointment and the others resume singing and dancing.*

The sentinel speaks like a wise old man and starts his narration as someone who has experienced much in life.)

VILLAGE SENTINEL: I am the village sentinel. This staff and the hands that hold it firmly are nothing but coagulated blood. This body grew fat, fed by the village. Till the last breath of this body, this village will be within the bounds of my guard. But, I remain torn to fragments between human dignity and suffering. The flames of blood that course through my veins force me to question things. My heart with broken wings is trapped in a spider's web and only battle-spirit oozes from it. I search in the dark for my eyes that have been cast out of their sockets. I am the village sentinel.

* * *

(*The village sentinel strikes a victorious pose centre stage. While the Chorus stands around gaping in awe, one of them approaches him hesitantly and tentatively touches his staff. Then, he tries to take it in his own hands. The village sentinel lets him do so. After taking possession of the staff, he tries to mimic the village sentinel by shouting,* 'All's well…. All's well!' *at the top of his voice. Laughing at him, another attempts to repeat this act. As everyone in the group now competes with each other to do the same, the staff automatically returns to the village sentinel.*)

NO 4: We lack the power! The call will sound right only if the old man does it.

CHORUS: (*In one voice*) Thatha! How did you become the village sentinel?

(*The same festival music that was heard before now picks up. The village sentinel and a challenger are in the ring, ready for the bout. The people around are shouting in support. The fight begins. The village sentinel wins.*)

DEFEATED MAN: A tough body. A steady mind. A king needs only these. Dignified words, they are vital for them.

YOUNG MAN: Don't ever question their dignity. A sturdy body. A steady mind. That's all that's needed. For whom? .... For the kingly sort ....

(*The villagers gather to tie anklets on the village sentinel's staff. A woman's distressed cries are heard.*)

VILLAGE SENTINEL: A tough body. A steady mind. The kingly need only these.

YOUNG MAN: For what? To pimp for them?

(*The enraged village sentinel wants to hit him, but controls himself.*)

VILLAGE SENTINEL: No, honesty once bound my mind. I gave myself up totally from head to toe. My heart overflowed only with the sense of duty. No one can question me on that. Ask any of my superiors . No one will deny my role. History—it was created by me. Shaped by these powerful shoulders. No one created it through wars. Ask the thousands of scars on my body .... They will speak of the history I created.

YOUNG MAN: History, my foot! It's like an inn where anyone can come in and find a bed. Your children are on the streets. So, the history you made must be of some worth! You, who give fruits to the village from the highest branches of trees, should you not care for the roots that sprout from your trunk?

VILLAGE SENTINEL: Who are you?

YOUNG MAN: A mango shoot.

VILLAGE SENTINEL: When things are happening according to cause and effect, why burden the mind with unwanted thoughts? It is already ordained that I am bound by duty to work. My effort is only to do what is necessary for that. Even if a mountain blocks my way, I will crush it in my palm and cast it aside.

Oh! Bhairava!
Rakkachi, mother demoness!
Karuppa, with eighteen steps to you!
May all my needs be fulfilled!
May I flourish!

YOUNG MAN: Oh! Bhairava!
Rakkachi, mother demoness!
Karuppa, with eighteen steps to you!

May all my needs be fulfilled!
May I flourish!

VILLAGE SENTINEL: Don't think I am an old man. Come close and have a look! The Eighteen-steps Karuppan and Bhairavan, hack-knives in their hands and anklets on their legs, are the escorts for my guard duty! I asked for their blessing by guzzling a pot of toddy through this left nostril of mine. I slaughtered a bull and appeased my mother demoness Rakkachi. At this age, if I do not fear the midnight hour, it is because of this tough body, steady mind, and dignified spirit.

YOUNG MAN: Dignity is vital, as you said. But, one should think of the descent when thinking of the ascent; think of black when thinking of white, think of the valley when thinking of the hill. You, aware of your own strength, are you not aware of the peoples' strength? For our people, though they are broken by hard labour like cart-bulls, the enemy is nothing but a speck of dust. I will also make offerings to Karupaayya so that our people can stand on their feet. They have not despaired yet. Our Mother demoness Rakkachi will reveal which one is the unvanquished army. Our Eighteen-steps Karuppan will make the people who were running around the village to run into it and force hesitant hands to reach out and shelter the entire village.

VILLAGE SENTINEL: We can speak to our heart's content. And speak wonderfully. Justice and sincerity—they were disbursed by the upper castes, weren't they? Is it right for us to follow other means?

YOUNG MAN: He disbursed justice and trustworthiness looking at this robust body, after observing this firm mind. He did the distribution, scared by the sense of dignity that brewed within this. The staff he has is a javelin. In our hands, it turns blunt ... something we realize only when we cast it. O, but they think this too is a javelin and are afraid ... and try to hide .... We incite our own people to fight each other and die. This wooden staff has protected life all these years. If your own life is in danger, will it be of any use? If the upper castes decide to destroy you, will this staff protect you? Remember ... the dead heroes Nandan, Kathavarayan, Madurai Veeran ... when they came forward with heads held high asking for justice, they were killed in betrayal and then anointed as gods. The whole village is thrilled to narrate the stories of their martyrdom. But, no one is able to describe how they lost their lives. Today I am here to pass judgment on the kings.

VILLAGE SENTINEL: Young blood boils for a short time. Trust not what it says.

YOUNG MAN: For one who believes in might this is not difficult to understand.

VILLAGE SENTINEL: What are you getting at?

YOUNG MAN: This strong sentinel staff, what tales can it narrate? What's the play it has been enacting?

VILLAGE SENTINEL: Why harp on old issues?

YOUNG MAN: You are not a dead tree, but an asset that should protect us. But, you choose to sleep in front of upper caste houses as if that's your only fate

VILLAGE SENTINEL: Don't confuse me!

(*A song slowly picks up.*)

The sky is growing dark, Kannamma!
My Ponnamma!
I am shivering to the roots of my hair!
My Ponnamma!

(*Suddenly, the jingling sound of anklets is heard. The entire group rushes out.*)

1: Katha Muthu is here. Shut your doors … fast ….
2: Katha Muthu is here. Run … fast ….

GIRL: (*Spotting the Village Sentinel*) You were also born with siblings from a woman, weren't you? You also gave birth to girls, didn't you?

(*Village Sentinel stops in front of a house.*)

VILLAGE SENTINEL: (*Calls out*) Veyilandi … Veyilandi ….

VEYILANDI: Help me god! Katha Muthu knocks on the door.

VILLAGE SENTINEL: Come out … be quick!

VEYILANDI: Katha Muthu! Your eyes fall on my house only? My daughter is a small child.

VILLAGE SENTINEL: I don't know about that. The kings have commanded me to take her to them.

VEYILANDI: You *know*! She grew up in your arms.

VILLAGE SENTINEL: I have no time to argue. Send her to the palace this evening.

VEYILANDI: Katha Muthu, they will rip my girl to pieces!

VILLAGE SENTINEL: What can I do about that?

VEYILNDI: You should have slashed him with your knife, shouldn't you? Instead of standing here pretending to be a human.

VILLAGE SENTINEL: Katha Muthu is trusted. That's why they give him at least one meal a day.

VEYILANDI: I can offer you the rice meal that I give to my dog. Will you be just?

VILLAGE SENTINEL: Enough! I have given you the message. Send your daughter. Don't prolong this great speech.

(*Katha Muthu rushes away, his anklets jingling.*)

* * *

VILLAGE SENTINEL: Oh, my daughter … I was not afraid, my daughter, not afraid … if you blast a rock, the crash will be heard even in the neighbouring village. But that the blasting rock will pierce the sky …. I couldn't see that.

YOUNG MAN: The way you howl night after night lingers vividly in my mind!

VILLAGE SENTINEL: My daughter …. Was it for this that I stood sentinel to the village? Was it my daughter's sacrifice that I was called to guard?

CHORUS: Meals … Meals ….

(*As in the first scene, there is a scuffle among the people. The village sentinel raises his head and watches. The one serving the rice abuses and beats the people milling around. The village sentinel drags him down along with his long ladle. Now, the crowd is not jostling for food. The village sentinel beats up the man and pushes him down. The people stand around and watch this, fascinated. The village sentinel gasps for breath. The Young Man approaches him, thrilled and angry.*)

YOUNG MAN: Duryodhanan is killing the Pandavas! Ekalavyan is drinking the blood of all the high caste fellows. In land after land, Ravanas become soldiers guzzling the blood of their enemies and piling up the bodies.

VILLAGE SENTINEL: No more shall we tolerate the title 'downtrodden' you've bestowed on us.

YOUNG MAN: No longer shall we accept your words calling us the 'weaker classes'.

VILLAGE SENTINEL: We are ready to bite off and spit the tongues that try to utter the demeaning word 'downtrodden' to humiliate us.

YOUNG MAN: Let's see whose spurting blood is superior.

VILLAGE SENTINEL: Let them stand up and come close … each one of them who claims to be an upper caste. Let's demonstrate our power, strength, skill, and steadfastness to the audience. *Come on now!* Any one of you who claims that he is an upper caste … *come on!*

—*Translated by Ravi Shanker*

PROSE

This section contains archival materials, speeches, autobiographical writings, and scholarly articles relating to Dalit history and culture in Tamil Nadu, and presents a clear picture of the century-long struggle of the erstwhile 'untouchables', portraying the historical continuity of the voices of Dalits and the heterogeneous nature of the Dalit question in the context of this region. The selections comprise material from the nineteenth century (1880) right up to contemporary times (post 2000). The section on 'Archives', which has a range of sources including East India Company records, pamphlets and appeals, as well as personal and journalistic writing, provides an insight into the unrecognized contribution of Dalits to 'prose' writing in colonial Tamil Nadu.

Although the formats of the pieces are varied, the historical context is ever-changing; the voices representing at least five generations of speakers/writers, have some themes in common:

- In the history of Tamil culture, 'caste', as we know it today, is a result of the 'Hinduization' of the secular, or rather, Buddhist, state. Support for this point of view can be found in the native Buddhist literary culture invoked in the writings of Pundit Iyothee Thass as well as in the contemporary agitations conducted by the Dalits in Tamil Nadu.
- The Dalits' view of the colonial ruler as just 'another authority' that assumes responsibility over its subjects shows why (a) the colonial question is inseparable from the caste question in the Dalit discourse, and (b) the Dalit critique of national as well as state-level Dravidian politics is part of a larger struggle against social exclusion.
- The role of Ambedkar and his contribution to the Dalit cause is interpreted within the regional context and also as an inseparable part of contemporary political and cultural evolution of the Dalits.

These materials are intellectually stimulating and present an alternative way of looking at history, with the potential to subvert our existing notions of Tamil Nadu's political and cultural history.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY/BIOGRAPHY

A Brief History of My Life*

Rettamalai Srinivasan

My forebearers used to say that they came from Thanjavur to the metropolis of Madras for the sake of business.

I was born in one of the villages in Chingleput district in 1860. When I was studying in the technical institute in Coimbatore, of the 400 odd children, all except ten, were Brahmins. On those days religious restrictions were strictly observed. I was afraid that if my fellow students discovered my caste, family, position, and so on, they would treat me badly. So, I would be reading somewhere outside the school and go to the class only when the bell rang announcing school hours. When the class disbursed, I would walk home rapidly, far ahead of the other students. Pondering over the pain of not even being able to play with other children, I used to get upset and think constantly about how to overcome this problem. In the ten years of my work as an accountant for European business firms in the Nilgiris, I was obsessed with the idea of how to get rid of the stigma of untouchability.

After I came to Chennai in 1890, I involved myself in various kinds of research for three years as to how to bring the so-called 'Paraiyas' to the level of other castes and make them respectable. I went south both by train and (mostly by) foot and visited the ruined walls of King Nandan's† fort, looked for the leather coins of King Nandan, the

* Original title *Jeeviya Saritiva Surukkam.*

† Contrary to the popular story of 'Nandanar' as an 'untouchable' Saiva saint (found in *Periya Puranam*), Pundit Iyothee Thass established with evidence the existence of King Nandan, who was killed for his harsh treatment of Brahmins. The recovery of this history made by Iyothee Thass through the text, *Naradiya Sangai*

religious *kalambagam* poetry composed by King Nandan and found out how the magnetic fort built by the Kammalar community was destroyed by the Sambavas. Then, I visited the walls of the Omakulam, the sacred pond, where the so-called 'Thirunaalaipovar', the saint-poet Nandanar stood and prayed, and the mutt beside the pond. I also visited the temples built in the name of Sambava Saambaan* in Thiruchirrirapalli, the temples of Piraviyadai Saambaan Periyanayaki and Maariyammai in Thanjavur, the Thiyaga Saambaan of Thiruvarur. Besides these, I visited the places where the Thiyaga Saambaan of Thiruvarur was cremated, the *samadhi* of Periaparaiyan which was so enormous that it was referred to as 'Elephantine', and came to know about the rights Thiyaga Saambaan's descendants had in the temple. I spent a night in that area, enquired about the temples close by, and about the conditions of the people of this community, who live without enough water to bathe or drink, in no position to have a hut, no road to walk, no means of livelihood, and about how they remain victims of this cruel practice of untouchability. Wherever they went, they were sure to be hurt if they said even a single word. Even the authorities who listened to their complaints acted against these people as they were afraid of caste Hindus. I returned only after I had completely understood the innumerable hardships of these people and their suppressed history.

When I examined the government records I found out that from 1772 onwards the authorities were concerned about the people of this caste. In 1818, the members of the Revenue Board had asked the collectors to find ways to improve the condition of the farmers of this caste. It is not clear how it happened. In 1893, they took steps to provide education. For 120 years they had nobody to inspire them. Even

Thelivu, discloses the unnoticed cultural history of the Tamils. According to *Periya Puranam*, the term 'Thirunaalai Povar' literally means 'the one (saint Nandan) who will enter the temple the next day', suggesting that he could go only after getting rid of the stigma of untouchability by plunging into the fire. *Naradiya Purana Sangai Thelivu*: text written by Ashwagosh containing details of Buddhist kings, including king Nandan, and their period of rule in southern India. Pundit Iyothee Thass recovers the Buddhist past of the so-called 'untouchables' based on this text and on his own research into the ancient history and culture of Tamils.

* Name of an 'untouchable' community, sometimes refers to 'Parayars' living in the south of Tamil Nadu in places including Kanyakumari, Tiruchy, and Thanjavur. It was said that they made a representation to the British demanding that they be called 'Saambaans'. The temple named after 'Saambaan' with the idol of Buddha in the village called Pettaivaaithalai in Thiruvarur district is worshipped by the 'untouchable' communities.

though the people of this caste considered the announcement in 1893 as an order, (somehow) it was not fulfilled. It was then that in 1893, I launched the magazine *Paraiyan* as a driving force.

For the pioneering help that I rendered to these crores of naïve, distressed people, the government happily conferred on me the title, *Rao Sahib* on 1 January 1926, *Rao Bahadur* on 3 June 1930, and *Divan Bahadur* on 1 January 1936.

Launch of *Paraiyan* in 1893

Like a man who keeps chanting 'I! I!' as the great mantra becomes fully aware, knowledgeable, and enlightened, so too a man who says 'I! I!', does not forget himself or his caste, speaks the truth without fear or embarrassment and enjoys his freedom, will become respectable and enjoy in this life wealth with daily peace; therefore, unless one from the Paraiya caste comes forward and says 'I am the one called a Paraiyan', he will not be able to get his freedom and remain downtrodden, in poverty stricken position. Therefore, I launched a magazine, crowning it with the name, *Paraiyan*. That came out in October 1893. A small monthly magazine of four pages costing two annas for each issue, the Parayas—my caste—who saw it accepted it joyously. For the advertisement and publishing of the first issue of the magazine the cost was Rs 10. Some 400 copies were sold in the city of Chennai within two days. After three months it became a weekly and after two years a printing press was also established. The magazine spoke on behalf of the members of the people called Parayas, requested the good wishes of the government, and suggested codes of good behaviour. Wherever these people live, they spoke happily about this magazine. On the evening of 7 October 1895, to prove that they too were a community, they entered the big Victoria Hall in Chennai with white flags and a band. They talked about their greatness and conducted the meeting with an impressive crowd. The people of this caste were meeting in the Victoria Hall for the first time. Starting from the village munsif, the caste Hindus in the Collector's Office, Revenue Board, and in other government departments began to give them a lot of trouble. Congress members, caste Hindus, agents of religious conversion stood against these people and against some of the separatists within the caste. They published another magazine. A few other magazines attacked us strongly. Someone from this caste went and complained that I was preparing to run away from the country and tried to embarrass me with a warrant. That did not succeed. In 1896,

under the pretext that the magazine had published some libelous matter, the separatists dragged me to court. People of this caste came in huge numbers to the court. Wearing the crown called *Paraiyan* on their heads and hearts, they had brought a sum of money. A hundred-rupee fine was fixed. It was not clear who paid the fine. They openly showed the affection and regard they had for their caste. Therefore, it is quite clear that the magazine *Paraiyan* was the driving force for the people of this caste to be given a voice, for their advancement, for establishing their *sabhas* and form a community.

When I went to London with regard to developing the people of this caste, the magazine had to be stopped because there was no one to run it. The magazine ran continuously for seven years. Since this movement spread throughout India, crores of people were enlightened and progressed.

When I reached Bombay on my way to London to show the British the position of the downtrodden and win their sympathy, my father sent me a telegram asking me to return. Like the saying, *the corpse that had gone to the cremation ground can never return*, I travelled in the first ship that was going westward and reached the island of Zanzibar [modern Tanzania] in southern Africa. After two years and making some money, I went towards South Africa, disembarked there. During the week I waited for the passport, I was stricken with malaria. I had to either live on board a ship for six months enduring the sea breeze or go to an extremely cold hill station. Returning to India would be fatal, warned the doctors. When I was sick, a dhobi from my caste and his good wife served me very diligently. Another wealthy man from there also looked after me. Then I left and went to the province of Natal and reached the port of Durban. A man called Antony H. Peter entertained me, sent me to a cold hilly region, and helped me to get a government job. It is not possible for me to forget the help that these three people rendered. In a town called Verulum in Natal, a rich farmer named Murugan told me that he saw a Brahmin's integrity only in me and forced me to accept *godaanam* (gift of cows) and sought my blessings. The good that I did to the poor people was like the coconut tree pouring water from its crown. It took many years for the populace of that land to find solutions for their problems. I had to return to my motherland to take care of my family. On my return, though I was very happy to see my people, seeing the extremely untenable condition of my caste people distressed me. I wondered whether *the corpse that had gone to the cremation ground would revive* and whether god would fulfil my wish to visit London. When I

reached Chennai, within a few years after serving as a member of the Legislative Council in the government, I was sent to London to attend the Round Table Conference as a representative of the downtrodden. Going there twice, helped the downtrodden to claim their freedom and rights not only in the province of Chennai but in the entire Indian nation. It was a great piece of luck for my people that my twenty-year dream of going to London was fulfilled.

How was the 'Adi Dravidar' community formed?

When the government representative and the governor general, Lord Elgin, visited Chennai on 6 December 1895, the people of the Parayar caste in order to show their strength built a huge temporary hall at the junction of General Patters Road and Mount Road, in Chennai, across broad Mount Road. They decorated it, the pandal, with placards on both sides bearing in golden letters, 'Paraiyar Mahajana Sabha's warm welcome to His Excellency Lord Elgin'. The people of this caste rejoiced on seeing the British flags waving 'Welcome! Welcome!' in the breeze, and the participation of important Indian officials in the function. Even at night the place was lit up and decorated.

After getting permission to submit a felicitation to the governor general, I, the secretary, took the president of the sabha and six other members to the governor's bungalow. On the way, one of us came up with the idea of taking along with us a wealthy man from this caste. When we went to such a person, he hesitated, argued, and refused. Consequently, we were delayed by half an hour. Since they did not see us, the servants were searching outside the building, thinking that we may be standing somewhere, afraid to enter. We went directly to the front of the building, got down from our cars and entered. People of this caste had never entered the building before; therefore the chief secretary wondered who they were. Anglo-Indians, Mohammedans, Christians, were all standing around in groups of eight, waiting. We also stood as a group. On seeing us, the people of the other castes seemed disgusted and angry. Lord Elgin spoke kindly to us, placing us on an equal footing with the other communities. From that day, the Paraiyars have been accepted as a distinct community outside Hinduism. The representatives of the government and the governors also recognized and treated them as a separate community. On 11 June 1898, the secretary of state had written that Her Majesty, the Empress of India, accepted with great happiness, the felicitations sent by these people for the celebrations of

her sixty years of reign in 1898. Like the aforesaid three groups, the Adi Dravidas consisting of Paraiyar, Panchamar, and the depressed class, got the right to take part in the administration, governance, and become ministers in the cabinet. That they can become members in legislative assemblies, municipalities, local boards, panchayats, and participated in the civil service, that these people are becoming ministers, mayors, is because of my efforts to improve their level of education and wealth, and establish them as a distinct caste group. Their maha sabhas have been continuously and actively functioning. It's just that the names changed to suit the times as the Madras Depressed Classes Federation and the Scheduled Castes Party. They have elected me as the leader for this Federation. Even today, caste Hindus are troubling the people of this caste. For a few years now, the civil service examination has been conducted in India as well as in England. Since the youth of our caste have advanced somewhat, there has been no protest against it. Every day in my prayer, I think of the unfortunate position of my caste people and pray to god for their betterment and prosperity.

It is said that those who work for the betterment of their community will prosper in every way for generations ....

Education

Thinking that to uplift the oppressed, poor, and the underprivileged, education must be made widely available, the government issued an order G.O.68-1893. That was an inspiration. The order has several clauses including the following: if there were at least seven children ready to study, the government must regard it as a school and give grants and other advantages. Not only did caste Hindus not come forward to teach the 'untouchables', but teachers could not be found among the 'untouchables' either. In the city of Madras, the schools that had been established for religious conversion by various groups were unwilling to take children of this caste as the government order was unprofitable for them. So the government order remains unfruitful in Chennai city. On 21 October 1898, I informed the government officials about this unfortunate situation. As a result, the Madras Municipality issued an order for establishing government schools. This helped the oppressed caste people to get quality education .... Every year, the government has been spending Rs 20–30 lakh on education through the labour commissioner and the Directorate of Education.

Legislative Assembly

Within three months of my being in the Legislative Assembly, the resolution which I moved demanding that the common roads, wells, public buildings, and markets must be accessible to the depressed sections, was unanimously passed.

In order to prevent the consumption of alcohol, I moved a resolution in the Legislative Assembly asking the government to close the liquor shops one day in a week, on Sundays, on festival days, and other holidays. The members accepted it. Accordingly, the liquor shops were closed on Sundays for a few months. Since it affects the revenue collected through excise duty, the government resumed liquor shops.

I put forward yet another resolution demanding that when illiterates had to put their thumb impressions in documents, it had to be read out in front of the tahsildar or some responsible citizen. Only then should they place their thumb prints in the presence of above mentioned witnesses and that mere thumb prints placed in the presence of a village munsif or accountants were not valid. But the government did not approve that.

Another resolution suggested that the government should not appoint munsifs, accountants, and others on a hereditary basis. The members in this ruling city had been agitating relentlessly against it. So this resolution was not even tabled before the Legislative Assembly.

Not only did I stop the rule and custom of the village court munsif putting the accused in the stocks, I had the stocks themselves burnt down.

A resolution was brought in the assembly demanding waiver of salt tax.* But I opposed it saying that since the salt tax was a meagre sum, the poor had no problem with it and suggested that the tax money could be used for the welfare measures of the poor. So they did not waive the tax. Since it was not waived, the Indian government arranged to give more than ten lakhs to the Chennai government. I expected that the government would spend this for the Adi Dravidas. But the government used it up for some other purpose.

* The nationalist historians recorded the campaigns and demonstrations demanding waiver of salt tax. In fact, Gandhi's 'Salt March' in Dandi was a significant event in the history of Freedom Struggle. But the 'untouchables' campaign demanding that the moneys collected from the imposition of salt tax on the wealthy landlords be spent on the welfare measures of the poor was completely ignored.

A resolution was moved demanding the waiver of land tax. Landowners own more land than they could cultivate.

When the poor farmer submits a petition urging that he may be allowed to cultivate the land owned by the government and make a living, these landlords who live in multi-storeyed buildings, ride on motorcycle and send their children to study and get good jobs, give innumerable troubles including blocking the path for water and cattle, by placing the village goddess, Ellaipidariamman and prevent the poor from getting a daily wage of even two annas. So I strongly opposed their demand for levying land tax saying that these people were not in such a difficult position to pay tax. The tax was not waived.

I served on several committees in the assembly. There, I spoke on various matters. I have also personally presented evidence before several commissions.

In the assembly, the members of the downtrodden caste elected me as the leader. I served in the Legislative Assembly for nearly fifteen years. I am now a member of the Legislative Council.

—Translated by Meera Rajagopalan

The Flames of Summer*

L. Elayaperumal

I was born on 26 June 1924 in Kattumanarkudi at Udayaarkudi Temple Street. My mother's name was Meenakshi. My father Lakshmanan was a good astrologer. When I was young and went along with my father, I would see Brahmins standing in the garden of our house. I used to ask why they stood outside and never entered the house.

My father replied, 'We are of a low caste. They are higher caste people—Brahmins. They have come to us for astrology. They are afraid of being polluted if they enter our house and that's why they stand outside. In spite of this, I am practising astrology as a professional.' Even at that stage—when I was young—my innocent mind could understand this 'state of affairs'. My parents came from a poor family. Those were the times of drunkenness—the British period. Though my father

* Original title *Cithirai Neruppu.*

sometimes advised the drunkards, he used to join them in drinking. On such occasions, the so-called landlords cheated us and seized our land by getting our signatures. This was the beginning of our bad times. Then, my mother died young and I was under my father's care.

When I returned home after my schooling, I got the news that both my father and Sivakami Ammal, who had brought me up, had died on the same day. When I asked how this had happened, I learnt that they had died of cholera and the Panchayat Board officers in charge of the cholera preventions had not sprayed the medicine as our house was in the Adi Dravida Street. Nor did they administer the inoculation. They had asked the people to come to the Panchayat Board Office but the poor and labour classes were unable to go to the Board Office. I realized that even the officers did not administer medicines because of their 'caste' attitude.

There were double and single Brahmin streets at Kattumanarkudi. The Adi Dravidas who worked there were not supposed to enter the street directly, but only through the grove, and they could not do so in slippers. They had to stand by the gate and make a particular kind of sound, on hearing which, the landlords opened the gate, gave orders, and sent them off to work.

When I asked why they could not enter or walk on the streets, my relatives and neighbours scolded me saying that I was heading for trouble and that the whole village would be ruined because of me. I asked them, 'They behave like this. Why don't you question them?' 'This is our plight. We are dependent on them for our livelihood. If we speak against them, they will not employ us. They will not let us buy anything in shops neither can we run a shop. Knowing no solution to all this, your speech of equality in society is not right.' They chided me thus and did not come forward to claim their rights. The people never came forward to fight for their rights. I was also in a helpless condition.

There was a Brahmin teacher called Anandachari in my school. He used to correct all the notebooks. But he would not touch my notebook—not even my slate. He would send another boy and say, 'Check whether what he has written is correct.' Though I felt hurt, I did not have the strength or courage to raise my voice. This was the beginning of my schooling.

When I was in my final year at school (SSLC), twenty students like me could not find any means for food. I, along with them, approached Sultan Maraikayar, a Congressman at Parangipettai and requested him to start a hostel for us. This he did. I became the warden and we all

managed this boarding house. He fed these twenty children with his own efforts and money. Then, later the government took over the hostel. It is still maintained as a government hostel. This is one of the most unforgettable incidents in my life.

Parangipettai was a Muslim village where Adi Dravidas served as employees. But one cannot enter those streets in slippers. Nor can Adi Dravidas drink tea or eat in their shops. The attitude of the caste Hindus was also followed by the Muslim brethren. When I asked why, they said, 'We will not have any business. We will be ostracized. If we join you, our business will sink and our economy will be affected. Even though we do not practise caste or untouchability in Islam, we have to follow such practices for the sake of our business and life.' In my four years of study there, the same situation of Muslims not admitting the Adi Dravidas into their shops prevailed. In 1944, my wedding ceremony had to be performed at Parangipettai. During the final year, I stayed in a friend's house and studied, leaving the hostel where I was a warden. Even though I was a warden, I could not stay there, as it was not conducive to my studies. So, I left the hostel and stayed in a fellow-being's house. So, I had to marry a girl in that house.

It was 1945—the Second World War was going on—I tried to join the Army. I was told that recruitment was made only for the civilian cadre and not the permanent army. Jobless, and with no means of earning my living, I joined the civilian army in the 206 IDOD Battalion.

In the place where we kept the midday meals a shameful situation of segregating the vessels used by Brahmins from others and the 'untouchables' existed. So, instead of placing my carrier there I kept it with me.

Seeing this, a supervisor Brahmin asked, 'Why are you storing your food under the table? If Captain French sees it, he'll get angry.' I asked him, 'You say it should not be kept together. Neither are you allowing me to keep it in my place. What else can I do?' 'Okay, keep it outside the compound,' he said. Luckily, Captain French had come there. 'What's the problem?' he asked. 'In our country, there is something called "Scheduled Caste". Those people asked us not to sit and eat along with others. Not allowed to sit and eat in the dining hall. Not allowed to keep even our food packets with that of others.' The angry captain sent for the Brahmin supervisor and scolded him saying that this kind of disparity was not to be practised. This Brahmin threatened to leave. 'Do so by all means,' said the captain. But the Brahmin did not quit.

I returned home after the end of the War. Then, on 16 January 1946, I was seated in a shop when a man with a towel passed by on the street. A lot of flies were buzzing on the towel.

I said, 'He must have got rice in that towel during Pongal and not washed it properly. That's why flies are buzzing.'

The shopkeeper's name was Santha Sahib. Entry was prohibited in other shops because of caste differences.

Santha Sahib said, 'What you say is true Elayaperumal. Why do your people in society go around like that? All of you are people of high castes. On hearing that this is how you will speak. "Look—if flies are buzzing it's because I received food or because my back is wounded."' That man shouted, shoved his towel aside, and showed us his back. It was full of bruises.

When I asked him, he said, 'I'd been away for Pongal to my mother-in-law's house for two days. Tied down and questioned why I hadn't come to work for two days, they made my own caste people beat me.' He belonged to the Udayur village—the place where Justice Somasundaram Pillai was born. If the Adi Dravida women of that village went to work, they were never given wages. If men worked, they were given 'a Madras measure' daily. A pillared stone was planted with a whip tied around it. They used that whip on us.

I took that beaten man to the police station. The policeman belonged to the Udayur village farm. Once he came to know that it was the birthplace of Justice Somasundaram Pillai, the policeman refused to take the case.

When asked why, he said, 'If you have courage, self-respect, you file the case. His name was Pakeerisami Naidu. So, I had to take that man to the village. Throughout the way, word was going around that a boy called Elayaperumal is on his way to Udayur. No one knew what was going to happen. Anyone who goes there is always beaten up and sent back. That boy does not listen to us.' Even though they talk like this, they went along to watch. Finally, there were about 1200 people. Seeing the crowd the relatives of the landlords there in Kattumanarkudi—Ramalingam Pillai, the son of Muthukumaran Pillai, Manickam Pillai, and others—had sent a telegram: 'Elayaperumal, a communist, has gathered a thousand people and has gone to loot the landlord's house.' Collector H.S. Paul and S.P. Kandasamy had reached the village even before we got there. When we got to the village, we saw that the houses had been closed with thorn-fences. That was *poromboke*, the unused

land, where our people had lived for more than hundreds of years. If you worked for these landlords, they allowed you to live in these houses. If you worked elsewhere for higher wages, they would close the houses with thorn-fences.

Collector Paul sent a messenger to fetch me. I sent a reply through him. 'I cannot come. Our man has already been beaten up. I have come only to ask about this. I have to know the reason for such beatings and sealing off with thorn-fences of homes. If necessary, let the collector come to the Adi Dravida Street. I cannot come there.'

The collector sent word. 'I myself will come. But there isn't enough space for all of us to meet. So let us meet under the banyan tree.' I agreed and went to the banyan tree. Looking at me, the collector asked, 'Are you a communist?' 'No sir. I don't know the meaning of the term, "communist".' When I displayed the man's wound, the collector was shocked. I told him, 'He is the man who was bound and beaten up. I came here only to enquire about this. Unless the man who beat him up is brought here, we will not disperse.' The collector sent a messenger but the man refused to come.

The collector sent word again that he would be dismissed from his *agamaniyakar* position. That brought him to us. When the collector asked, 'What do you say to this tying and beating up of a person?' the man said, 'I didn't do it. His own caste people did it. If you want ask him.' But those who beat him replied honestly, 'It was this Pillai who asked us to beat him. If we hadn't obeyed, he would have sealed off our houses also with thorn-fences. Then, our children and wives would be on the streets. Without any work, we would starve.'

When the collector asked, 'If he asks you to beat me will you do it?' They said, 'Of course. If he orders us to, we will hit you.' After hearing this, the collector told the landlord, 'You have to provide food for this man till his wounds heal. You have to give Rs 100 for his treatment. If women work you have to pay them wages.' The collector called the superintendent and ordered him, 'Arrest all these men and load them into the van.' Only then, the landlords agreed.

Looking at me, he then asked, 'What is your demand?' It was a time when I did not understand properly what 'demand' meant. I brought the Adi Dravida and Vanniyar people together and spoke to them. They wanted the existing wages to be doubled and women had to be given one *padi* of paddy. He looked at the landlords and announced that the same should be given not only here but in all the surrounding *oor*s also. I informed this to the collector. This incident took place on 18 January

1946. It gave all the Adi Dravida people a feeling of exhilaration. They made the same demand for their villages too. As the then Tahsildar Thangamani Nadar and the Collector were Christians, they were able to discuss and take such a decision. As the collector had ordered legal proceedings and imprisonment for those who did not implement this, it became a practice in every village.

It was at this time that Babasahib Ambedkar organized a meeting at Nagpur and gave a press release: 'Let not "untouchables" depend anymore on anyone. Come together as the Scheduled Caste Federation! You lead your struggle.' It was only after seeing this that I got the blessed opportunity to write to him. Then I got a chance to meet our father-like Sivaraj and mother-like Meenambal. When I went to meet Rettamalai Srinivasan in 1946, I was told that he had died just three months before. However, I was able to meet the elderly M.C. Rajah.

It was then that Ambedkar himself proclaimed that the Poona Pact* that he signed with Gandhi was not favourable to the 'untouchables'. The one who in 1932 went in for the pact, himself said in 1946 that it was not right. The same thing was said in 1950 as well as in 1954. The situation became such that Ambedkar proclaimed in the Rajya Sabha-Upper House: 'If this Constitution does not safeguard my people, I will be the first person to burn it.'

From that day onwards, Ambedkar's thoughts had occupied my mind. The protest that I began in 1946 continued till 1949. It was in 1948 that the communists were staging protests in Thanjavur district for an increase in wages. But my relationship with the communist leaders Sankariah and Nallakannu wasn't recent but one formed even before our country's independence.

I was acquainted with Pundit Pulavar Aarumugam even before he formed the organization in 1946. One day he walked 16 miles from Thiruvekalam to Mannarkudi to see me at 1 am. On arriving, he was in tears. When asked why, he said, '*Harichandra*[†] was staged in our street. We staged it at our own expense. One of our Adi Dravida brothers played

* Poona Pact (24 September 1932) signed by Mahatma Gandhi and Dr Ambedkar which resulted in the present system of reserved constituencies for Dalits as against Ambedkar's demand for separate electorate.

† In *Bhagavatam Purana*, a king who represents righteousness and was known for his fair and honest dealings. This brought him to penury and led to the loss of his family. Since he was an upper caste icon, the low caste who played the role was attacked and beaten up. In the Tamil folkloric context, the story of Harichandra has mostly been performed by the people belonging to the Vanniyar caste group.

the role of Maharaja Harichandra. In a particular scene, he adjusted a chair on the stage and sat on it, upon which people from the Vanniyar community got together and agitated saying, 'How dare a Pariah play the role of the king in this village, and sit on a chair!' They broke the chair, beat up the people, and drove them away, said Aarumugam. That very night I journeyed to that place. If we go by bus, they'll hit us. As it was a time of thugs, the six of us rushed from Kattumanarkudi to Thiruvekalam on foot. Even before we could get there, the Vanniyars got together and had a written statement from the landlord saying, 'There is no problem here, the play went on well, the village is calm and peaceful.' When I asked them, Why have you given a statement like this? they said, 'If we didn't, they'll beat us.' Then, poet Aarumugam lodged a written complaint with the deputy superintendent to conduct an enquiry and proved that the Vanniyars had done something very wrong. 'This should not happen again, that too near a university, and such things should end,' I said.

It was then that I came to know that Swami Sahajananda was going to visit the village called Ilanangoor to campaign about the prohibition of liquor. A ten-feet deep pit was dug on the path he was travelling on. Sticks were piled up and then mud heaped to hide the pit. But an elderly Vanniyar of that village, who was a relative of Subramania Padayachi, a contractor in Chidambaram, came to Nandanar Mutt at night and said, 'Swami, you should not come to Ilanangoor tomorrow. A pit has been dug and your car will fall into it if you do.' But Swamiji said, 'I will come.' He took contractor Subramania Padayachi to Ilanangoor and stopped the car near the pit. A deep pit was seen when the sticks were removed. Swami Sahajananda went on courageously conducted his campaign and returned. A wretched condition prevailed in the village. The landlords used the Pillaimars and Vanniyars to hit the Adi Dravidas and the Adi Dravidas to hit the Vanniyars. When we had gone there, two Adi Dravidas had come from Malaysia. They were wearing neat clothes. When they were returning from Chidambaram, some people waited in the Kansahib sluice, murdered and buried them in a single pit. One of them was Samikannu and the other was Thirumalai. When they went missing and a search was made with sniffer dogs who found the pit. The bodies were dug out and a case registered. But the case was dismissed for lack of eyewitnesses.

At that time, poet Aarumugam from Thiruvetkalam, K.P.S. Mani from Seerkazhi, and I jointly formed a movement, whose meeting took place at Thiruvekalam. It was only after this meeting that we three got

together and visited one village after the other. Veeran, Perumal Nayinar and others stood by us, despite their difference with Swami Sahajananda. Though Swami Sahajananda was upset with our Communist-like activities, he strongly supported us in all these activities.

In 1946, the village chieftain Marimuthu's son, Vadamalai, had just returned from the Army. The caste Hindus did not like to see Vadamalai in his neat clothes and stylish haircut when he came after he had a bath in Kollidam. Saying—this fellow is trespassing caste norms—they tied him to a tamarind tree for three days. The people from that village came and told me about this. This is atrocious, I said, and when I went there, about three thousand Adi Dravida youth and elders had come to the village upon hearing this news.

The Vanniyars of that village, thinking that we were coming to destroy their village had stocked boiling hot water, chilli powder, and hot gruel to throw on us and got ready to attack us. When we reached and met Nagapan, Manickam, *thalayari* Marimuthu and I made enquiries, we learnt that they had a rule that no 'untouchable' in the village should sport a moustache; women should not wear blouses or anklets nor use brass utensils. 'Untouchables' should not bathe in the nearby Rajan Irrigation Channel spots in front but only by the side of the water outlets. If one bathed up in the front, it was believed it would defile the water. Though there was a good road, funeral processions could not be taken that way. One had to take a detour of two and a half miles. That too, you had to wade through four to five feet of deep water. This was the conditioned state of affairs they created. Believing that fighting against this was right, poet Aarumugam, K.P.S. Mani, and I got involved in this protest.

There were more than 500 Vanniyar families in that village. Adi Dravidas were just thirty. When we asked them, are you ready to leave this village, they said 'yes'. Grouping these thirty houses, there was a place nearby called Pillaiyarthangal. It was under the control of Justice Somasundaram Pillai. It was a poromboke land belonging to Natham. When we learnt it belonged to the government, we went from village to village, for help to build houses, to collect saplings, paddy, plaited palm-leaf roofings, and clothes. We got them by the thousand and we made arrangements to rehabilitate these people.

The government got to know of this and the collector and the superintendent made personal visits to inspect the situation. I told them—Ask these people. If they agree, take them to their old dwelling. When they asked the people, they said—We will not go back there. We

have suffered enough. We have been rescued and placed here by this brother. We will not go back there again! Moved by this, the collector said, 'This is not the solution to this battle. I will settle it myself' and involved himself in the reconciliation. People representing Rajagopal Reddiar had also arrived. Rajagopal Reddiar's family was seen as rulers even by my ancestors who had worked as farm labourers under them. Our landlord had the custom whereby the bridegroom had to arrive on horseback. Though at Kattumannarkudi, you couldn't walk on the streets, couldn't wear a shirt or slippers or enter any shops, Reddiar believed that his farm labourers should live with self-respect and insisted that a bridegroom should come to his house only on horseback. Knowing about this, the Vanniyars thought—Elayaperumal will listen only to whatever Rajagopal Reddiar says. So, the panchayat was arranged under his leadership.

But I cornered him and asked, 'You may deceive my grandfathers, my father but not me. Inspite of being a Congress leader you think of reinstating these people in that village where there is no equality! In what way is this justifiable?' He then replied, 'Elayaperumal, the fire you've ignited is not the holy fire of Karthikai.* This is the fire of Chithirai.† If this catches fire, no one can put it out. You are a young man. That's why you're acting like this. Everyone has planned to kill you. That's why I came forward for a peace talk.' He advised me thus.' It's okay. Even if I die, it's okay. That boy's moustache was set on fire just because they have the norm that an 'untouchable' shouldn't have a moustache. They had him tied up and beat him for three days. Not a drop of water was given to him. The man who tied him up was Neelamega Padayachi. He was the Maniyakarar of the village. The boy's father was a thalayari. In spite of being thalayari he couldn't protect himself nor his son. Thinking there is a person called Elayaperumal and if I go to him, he will help me, he came to me not once but thrice. The boy was untied only after I went to them. The bruises caused by the ropes on his hands and legs have not faded. Only because he had Army training and good food could he endure three days' of starvation. 'Look at this! What a plight,' I said. Rajagopal Reddiar said, 'What the Vanniyars did was wrong, I ask for forgiveness on their behalf. You need to go back.' Then, I also accepted.

* Refers to the celebration of Karthikai Theebam (Flame), a festival of fire when flames are lit on top of the hill in Tiruvannamalai, in the Tamil month of Karthikai.

† Refers to the peak of summer during the month of Chithirai in the Tamil calendar.

When the agreement was written, it was clearly spelt out: contrary to an earlier rule that Adi Dravida women shouldn't wear blouses, they could wear anything. They were forbidden to use brass vessels. Now, they could. There was a rule that dead bodies shouldn't be taken on public roads. Now, they could be. There was the custom of men beating women if they didn't come for work. From now on, we will not beat them on any pretext. Moreover, we will pay Rs 1,000 as compensation for the mistake we've done.

There was an elderly man called Rajagopal Padayachi who was above sixty years of age who came to me and said, 'Elayaperumal, you have brought my wife. Send her back to me.' I could not understand him then. 'What are you saying, Thatha?' I asked him. He said, 'I love the villagers like my wife. You've brought all of them here. Do justice by me.' Hearing this, Rajagopal Reddiar said, 'Elayaperumal I also ask your forgiveness. This elderly man has also asked your forgiveness. What else do you expect?' He asked me, 'Do you want to do good for these people or wrangle with this one case and get murdered?' 'It's okay if I die. You talk like this even after seeing the atrocities done to these people by the Vanniyars,' I said. To this, he said, 'The times will change. You will get freedom.' Now, he is no more. Toddy is being brewed there like a factory. I fear that the old, atrocious conditions may return. I have also reported this to the present collector and superintendent.

—Translated by D. Venkataramanan

Ideological Difference with Periyar*

Veerammal

(This self-narration was written entirely in the third person.)

After Veerammal was abandoned by her husband, she stayed in Periyar's camp for sixteen years. It was the site of the thinker she respected and adored.

On Sundays she stayed in Periyar Maaligai, his residence in Tiruchi, the whole day, asked him many questions about his ideology. She discussed with him issues relating to rationalism, eradication of

* Original title *Thandai Periyar Avarkaludan Karuthu Verupadu.*

untouchability, anti-caste work, and intercaste marriage. For instance, she would ask him, 'Beating of the drum *parai* and blowing *tharai* are considered symbolic of the lowly status of a community. That being so, how can you allow these instruments to be played in your processions? After all, you struggle to remove untouchability.' And he would answer, 'It is an art.'

Veerammal would vehemently counter this. 'I do not agree. Does anyone learn this art from any guru? Does any one pay to be taught this? Who gives this the status of an art and organize concerts? This is a hereditary work of a particular community. Do the so-called upper castes try to learn this art? When there is a need to beat the drum and blow the tharai, they go to the cheri and holler for Pakkiri, Samban, and Mookan. Even today parai and tharai continue to be symbols of degradation. Similarly, when someone dies in the family of those who label themselves as superior caste, they call a pallan, from the low caste, and ask him to go and announce the death to the neighbouring villages. He is called to cremate the body. Ayya, if you wish you can bring about a drastic change in these practices. Can't you take steps to ensure that more and more people marry outside their caste so that caste eventually disappears? Why can't you issue a statement in the press that if girls come forward to marry educated young men from Scheduled Castes who are in good position, you would participate in such weddings without charging the usual fee for Dravida Kazhagam fund? Why can't you set up a trust to encourage intercaste marriage among the other castes also?' Veerammal will raise questions like the above. Periyar would answer all these questions with a smile, 'Yes ... it can be done ... it can be done.'

On one occasion Veerammal and Periyar were discussing reservation in government jobs. She said, 'Look ... Ayya! You can demand any number of concessions for the non-Brahmin castes and insist on reservation according to their number. But please do not grudge the 16 per cent reservation that the Dalits, who have remained debased as "untouchables" at the lowest rung of the society. You have said in public meetings "These are good times for harijans .... This is their time." How can you talk in this vein?' Veerammal was not convinced about the explanation given by Periyar.

Veerammal continued to have differences of opinion with Periyar on the subject of the injustice suffered by the oppressed classes, the brutal treatment inflicted by the upper castes on the lower castes. In

particular, in the Muthukulathur riots,* in which one particular upper caste massacred the lower castes, affected her deeply. She poured her heart out in a long letter to Periyar. She had concluded the letter with these words, 'Consider all this and think about their plight, using your analytical abilities.' She sent the letter by hand through her nephew Pa. Kannaiyan to be handed over to Periyar and added one copy to be given to his wife Maniammai. Kannaiyan was committed to the ideas of Dravida Kazhagam. Even in his student days he had taken part in anti-Hindi agitations† and burnt the Constitution and had been imprisoned.

Kannaiyan, on returning, told Veerammal what happened when he handed over the letter to Periyar, 'I stood near Ayya when he read the letter. I saw his eyes filling with tears. It was so moving. He asked me to let you know that he cried when he read the letters. When I was moving away, Maniammai called me and asked me about what Periyar said. I told her. She asked me to approach Periyar again and ask him for his response. Periyar repeated what he said with tears in his eyes. Then I took leave of both of them.'

Kannaiyan continued: 'Maniammai instructed me to go to Periyar and ask him again so that he would repeat what he said about the letter. She has so much of love and respect for you.' Kannaiyan now lives in a village called Tiruparaithurai. He took part in the anti-Hindi agitation and was jailed. The employment order he had received from the Railways was cancelled because of this.

Veerammal wept on hearing about Periyar's reaction to her letter. She recalled the lessons on rationalism she had learnt from him and the love and affection he had showered on her. She had the satisfaction that her ideas on 'untouchables' had reached Periyar and that he had seen her point of view. However, she stopped visiting Periyar Maligai.

* The riot took place between Mukkalatthors—comprising Kallar, Maravar, and Thevar castes—represented by the sole leader, Muthuramalinga Thevar, and the Dalits, comprising the Pallar caste in 1957. The problem occurred when Muthuramalinga Thevar refused to share equal position in a peace-talk with the Dalit leader Immanuel Sekaran and subsequently had him murdered. In the riot that erupted, many, including 42 Dalits, were killed.

† In the thirty-year history of agitation against the imposition of Hindi in Tamil Nadu, the significant one was conducted in 1965 during the Congress rule headed by Rajaji. This was an important Tamil revivalist struggle that helped establish the Dravidian Munnetra Kazhagam as a major political party in the state.

However, she did not waver from the principles of Self-Respect Movement and the rationalist path. She believed that superstitious beliefs were a major hurdle to the progress of our society. She carried on propaganda among people on the topic 'Ignorance and Superstitions'. On occasion she spoke on the All India Radio (AIR) on this subject, during the women's programme.

Veerammal was ever grateful to Periyar for his tireless campaign against untouchability, for women's education, and for writing the memorable book *How Was Woman Enslaved* (1942). She would often stand before his portrait and pay her homage to him. Till 1992 she subscribed to the magazine *Arivu Vazhi*.

When Periyar passed away, Veerammal was in Kolkata, attending the All India Women's Conference. She wrote a long letter to Maniammai lamenting the passing away of the fearless lion of Tamil Nadu. On her return from Kolkata, she reached Chennai and went to Periyar's memorial, placed a wreath, and paid her final homage to him. She then boarded a train to Tiruchi.

—Translated by S. Theodore Baskaran

Karukku

Bama

One day, we were playing on the big neem tree in front of the school, hanging like bats, upside down from its branches. After a while, we started on another game—running right up the coconut palm and touching its tip. The coconut palm grew slantwise, at a convenient angle. If you came running along from a distance, at top speed, you could reach right to its tip and touch the coconut growing there. Spurred on by the excitement of the first few who managed to touch the coconut, those who came later, grabbed it and gave it a twist before climbing down. By the time I got there, the coconut fell at my touch, dropping with a thud. It wasn't even a fully ripened coconut, just a green one, without much water in it. All the children were frightened and ready to scatter. Everyone said that it was I who had plucked it. Then we just left it there and ran home.

The next morning at assembly time, the headmaster called out my name. 'You have shown us your true nature as a Paraya,' he said. 'You

climbed the coconut tree yesterday after everybody else had gone home, and you stole a coconut. We cannot allow you inside this school. Stand outside.' I was in agony because I had been shamed and insulted in front of all the children.

The headmaster was of the Chaaliyar caste. At that time, there was a battle going on between the Chaaliyar people and us, about the cemetery. All the children eyed me in a strange way and walked off to their classes. I was in such shock and pain, I didn't know what to do. Then a teacher who lived along our street came by and advised me to go to the priest, tell him everything, and bring a letter from him to the headmaster. I went to the priest and told him the whole story in detail, and begged him to give me permission to go back to school. The priest's first response was to say, 'After all, you are from the cheri. You might have done it. You must have done it.' The tears started welling up in my eyes and I wept. After a long time, the priest wrote a note asking that I should be allowed to return to the school. When I took it to the headmaster, he abused me roundly, using every bad word that came to his mouth, and then told me to go to my classroom. When I entered the classroom, the entire class turned round to look at me, and I wanted to shrink into myself as I went and sat on my bench, still weeping.

I studied up to the eighth class in my village, and then went on to high school in a neighbouring town. I was very surprised when I saw the school there, the children who attended it, and the clothes they wore. I felt very shy and almost fearful. It felt good just to climb the stairs and to walk into the classrooms upstairs, in such a big school. But I got used to it soon enough. And I also began to work at my studies eagerly. The children living in the hostel who were the same age as me wore smart clothes and possessed all sorts of finery like jewels and wristwatches. I thought to myself that they were, in all probability, from upper caste families.

The warden-sister of our hostel could not abide low caste or poor children. She'd get hold of us and scold us for no rhyme or reason. If a girl tended to be on the plump side, she'd get it even more. 'These people get nothing to eat at home; they come here and they grow fat,' she would say publicly. When we returned to the school after the holidays, she would say, 'Look at the cheri children! When they stay here, they eat their fill and look as round as potatoes. But look at the state in which they come back from home—just skin and bone!' It was really embarrassing. We too paid our fees like everyone else, for our food, for this and that. Yet we had to listen to all this as well.

When I went home for holidays, if there was a Naicker woman sitting next to me in the bus, she'd immediately ask me which place I was going to, what street. As soon as I said the cheri, she'd get up and move off to another seat. Or she'd tell me to move elsewhere. As if I would go! I'd settle into my seat even more firmly. They'd prefer then to get up and stand all the way rather than sit next to me or to any other woman from the cheri. They'd be polluted, apparently. This happened to me several times. When I came home and told my mother, she advised me, 'Say you are from a different caste. They'll never know.' I'd tell myself, 'But why should I pretend to these people that I'm from a different caste?' All the same, the pain I felt was not a trifling one.

Many of the children at my school were very poor at their lessons. I studied hard and got the best marks in my class. Because of this, all the children would speak to me and were friendly. Frequently, I remembered what *Annan* had said to me when he was at home. The teachers and sisters who taught me often encouraged me and were friendly towards me. This made me even more keen about my lessons. They asked me to help the children who were really backward at their lessons. I was overjoyed.

All the same, every now and then, our class teacher, or the PT teacher would ask all the Harijan children to stand up, either at assembly, or during lessons. We'd stand. They'd write down our names and then ask us to sit down again. We felt really bad then. We'd stand in front of nearly 2000 children, hanging our heads in shame, as if we had done something wrong. Yes, it was humiliating.

I was awarded a prize for standing first among all the Harijan pupils of that district who took the government SSLC examination that year. My name was called out in assembly and everyone clapped. My mother and I stood side by side very happily. And on that day I wasn't embarrassed to be singled out as Harijan, as the Harijan child who had gained the best marks. I was even pleased. And the other children congratulated me for doing so well. I thought, why? Is it impossible for a Harijan to study, or what? I felt a certain pride then, a desire to prove that we could study just as well as others, and to make progress.

So I finished my schooling in these parts and started my college studies at a village some distance away. I had thought that at such a big college, at such a distance away, among so many different students, nobody would bother about such things as caste. But even there, they did certainly consider caste differences. Suddenly one day a lecturer announced, 'Will Harijan students please stand; the government has arranged that Scheduled Caste students should get special tuition in the evenings.' Just two students stood up: myself and another girl. Among the other students, a sudden rustling; a titter of contempt. I was filled with a sudden rage. At once I told the teacher that I didn't want their special tuition or anything else and sat down. It struck me that I would not be rid of this caste business easily, whatever I studied, wherever I went.

At another time I asked for permission to go home because my younger brother and sister were to make their First Communion. It was to be for a Saturday and Sunday; these were anyway customary holidays. Even so, the principal and the warden joined together and were adamantly refusing to allow me to go. I grew hot with anger. I saw with my own eyes that they were giving permission for the wealthy children to go home. I lost my temper and challenged them head-on, 'How is it that you are allowing these others to go; why is it that you only refuse me?' The reply that I was given: 'What celebration can there be in your caste, for a First Communion?' They told me, in their domineering way, that they could not let me go to attend minor occasions like this. The more they spoke, the more I felt a wild rage impelling me to go, come what may. So I stood my ground obstinately. I managed to get my way at last by insisting that there cannot be different rules for different castes, only the same rules for everyone.

When I finished schooling in my village and joined the convent boarding school to study in the ninth class, the fear—*bhayam*—that I felt towards God gradually left me, and love—*paasam*—grew. I tried to the best of my ability to pray at all times; to go to Jesus, look at him, and talk to him frequently; not to behave in a way that would cause him pain; not to commit sinful deeds; to be good. There used to be a three-day retreat every year. I loved it. It was at that time that I began to do such things as going to Pusai every day, receiving Communion, and making a weekly confession with a loving and accepting mind. I really liked the sisters there. I had a deeply held wish in my heart to become a nun like them and give myself to God. When I finished my exams after the tenth class, I told one of the sisters about my wish. But she told me that I should only consider it after I had finished my college education.

With difficulty I admitted myself into college. But it was during the time I was studying there that the love and devotion that I felt towards God gradually diminished. Of course, in times of trouble, I thought to myself, 'God help me,' but that was all. Everything became a matter of routine drudgery. All sorts of questions beset my mind, such as, 'Why

should I go to Pusai every day? Why should I take communion?' I began to think that the priests and nuns had deceived me hugely. Up to that time I had thought that God came to me through these people; but this belief changed to the extent that I now began to feel strongly that God was not with them. And so, I began to dislike everything they did. I began to question them. I argued and fought. I thought to myself with some disgust; che, they are all hypocrites and frauds.

I felt in my heart that I could go and speak directly to God without their intervention. I could no longer believe that God could only be reached, as they had taught us, through prayer learned by rote, through pious practices, through the novena and the rosary. I came to realize that you could see God through the mind's eye, in nature, and in the ordinary events of every day. So all the rituals that I had followed and believed in so far suddenly began to seem meaningless and just a sham. The desire to become a nun fell away from me entirely at this time.

I finished my education and started to work. By chance I took up a post at a school run by nuns. At the start, when I met them, I thought they would be different in their ways. But as time went on, I realized they were truly like 'whited sepulchres', as Jesus said. Until I quite realized this, I was even tempted to enter their order and to become one of them. Fortunately I didn't do so.

I worked there for five years. All the children who attended that school were from poor families. About three fourths of them were from Dalit families. I liked teaching them. I was happy in my fashion. But when I observed some of the atrocities that were going on, I would be ablaze with fury. They could have done so much for those poor children. Instead they ate and lived in comfort and argued amongst themselves.

They ran a boarding school which was nominally for the sake of destitute children, but in fact they made those children do every menial task that was needed. They behaved as if they were the queens there and everybody else was there only to run errands for them. The few nuns who were even slightly humane had a difficult time. And even amongst themselves there were caste divisions, divisions between the rich and the poor, and even divisions over the languages that they spoke.

Besides the usual lessons, they could have educated the Dalit children in many matters and made them aware of their situation in the world about them. But instead, everything they said to the children, everything in the manner in which they directed them suggested, that this was the way it was meant to be for Dalits; that there was no possibility of change. And mainly because of this, those children seemed to accept everything as their fate. From dawn to dusk they toiled away in the convent. As I saw all this, I became very troubled at heart. I was angry; I thought to myself, what sort of nuns are these, they claim that they are helping the poor and the needy, yet this is how they are. At times I confronted them and argued with them.

Yet, even though I observed these nuns and their way of life, from time to time I was still seized with a wish to enter an order. I wanted to become a nun, but to be different; I felt a yearning to treat these children as all children ought to be treated, to look after them rather than torment and exploit them. At the same time, I kept on telling myself obstinately that I ought not ever to enter a convent. I continued to cherish in my heart a certain love and devotion towards Jesus and Our Lady. But I found what the nuns and priest said distasteful. Occasionally, when a priest from other parts came and addressed us about our society and about the needs of our people, I would feel an eagerness within me. And it was during those days that I was suddenly seized by a desire to read the Bible through, at least once. So morning and evening, I read my way through the Old Testament and the New Testament.

I learnt that God has always shown the greatest compassion for the oppressed. And Jesus too, associated himself mainly with the poor. Yet nobody had stressed this nor pointed it out. All those people who had taught us, had taught us only that God is loving, kind, gentle, one who forgives sinners, patient, tender, humble, obedient. Nobody had ever insisted that God is just, righteous, is angered by injustices, opposes falsehood, never countenances inequality. There is a great deal of difference between this Jesus and the Jesus who is made known through daily pieties. The oppressed are not taught about him, but rather, are taught in an empty and meaningless way about humility, obedience, patience, gentleness.

I truly don't know what happened to me, in spite of all my criticism of the nuns. More and more the thought grew in my mind that I should become a nun and teach those who suffer that there is a Jesus who cares; to put heart into them and to urge them onwards. At the same time, I also was aware that even if I became a nun, I might never be allowed to act in this way. All the same, however hard I pushed it away, the idea grew stronger. Sometimes I was even embarrassed that I should harbour such a notion after all these years of criticizing and reproaching the nuns.

When I discussed my plan at home and with my close friends, not one of them supported me. Everyone thought I was joking, I wasn't being serious. I myself wished I could be free of the notion. But the

more I hoped to be free of it, the greater grew the urge to enter an order. So, in spite of all the people who advised me against it, in spite of some of them downright forbidding me to do it, I resigned my job and prepared to enter a religious order. Today I realize what an extremely foolish thing I did. But at that time I didn't understand, in the least, what I was doing. I was like one who was falling into a well, blindfolded.

In the end I was disappointed by the order that I entered. But to begin with, the first three years were not quite like that. To some extent at least we read and studied about people's hardships and suffering and about the human attributes of Jesus. We discussed these things. We thought with some urgency about what we ought to do and how we should do it. Time passed, full of the bright imagined hope of what we might achieve after we became nuns. We read about the woman who founded our order. It was good to learn of her love and concern for the poor and of how she lived and died for their sake. I felt an unshakeable desire to be like her, to suffer for the sake of the poor then and in the future.

At that time, all my prayers, and thoughts were directed towards the oppressed and exploited people and towards the Jesus who fought for justice and fairness. It seemed to me it was meaningless to repeat prayers in beautiful and decorative language, and to live without that correspondence and connection between prayer, worship and life. I talked to others about my convictions. When there did not seem to be this connection, I asked why it wasn't there. We should never believe one thing and do another. We should speak up about what we believe, and act according to that. That is being true to oneself. Everything else is play-acting. I never cared to survive by acting out a role.

—Translated by Lakshmi Holmström

Scar*

K.A. Gunasekaran

The *pey*'s victims were usually Muslim women. Rituals would then be done for appeasement. Before dawn, the used ritual materials would be cast by the village pond. My brother and I would go there, pick out the

* Original title *Vadu.*

petty change and buy puffed rice, groundnuts, and sweets with it. We kept this a secret as our mother would scold us.

During the annual holidays, the village pond would go dry. As there was no fish to catch, I would go to sell mangoes. We subsisted on the commission earned from the shopkeepers which we gave to Amma to buy rice. For her part, Amma would feed us with the money she earned by cutting *karuvai* trees, making firewood bundles and selling it to the Muslim houses.

She would also go to the Green Talkies and furtively collect dung from the bullock-carts of the villagers who had come for the evening and night shows. I would be nagged into going along with her. In the morning she would flatten the dung and make ends meet by selling the dried dung cakes. During the rainy season, she would earn money by cutting and making bundles of grass, which she sold to the Muslim households who kept cattle. Most mornings we had tamarind seeds for breakfast. Tamarind seeds were dry roasted the evening before, the brown skins removed and soaked in water. The white seeds would be the morning meal. If we ate *idli* or *dosai* in the morning, then it was either Deepavali or Christmas.

We were so poor that there were no ear-piercing ceremonies for my sisters—Kalavathy, Malathy, and Jothi. One Saturday my mother just took my younger sister to the weekly shandy, got her ears pierced for fifty paise, put a one-rupee earring in her ears and brought her back. When I see the various ceremonies and jollity at some ear-piercing functions, I feel sad that it was not performed for my sisters. I have also felt miserable, when seeing the variety of invitations these days for puberty ceremonies, that none was conducted for my sisters.

All my life, we lived only in rented houses. Often, we had to move out because we could not pay the rent. Even as there is a sense of pride in living in our own house, the memory of experiences in rented houses are not easily forgotten. I remember an incident that took place in a rented house. Actually it was not a house at all but a large shed built for storing materials. There were no partition walls inside. My youngest sister and brother were then more than twelve years old. There was a single palmyra tree in front of that house. After darkness, nobody would venture in the vicinity. There was a small unused pond behind the house. The pond with steps leading down into it had probably been used a long time ago. Both the land and building belonged to a Muslim. Unnoticed by us, coins, cloth, and rice, used for appeasement of spirits would be stealthily placed under the palmyra tree.

In the beginning we were scared but then got used to it. However, when I used to return after buying something at night, I had to bolster my courage singing 'Fear is foolish' till I could sprint into the house. If even singing did not sink my fear, I would stand in front of *Periamma* Mariam Biwi's house and shout loudly 'Amma! Amma!' My mother, on hearing my shouts, would come with a lantern and take me home. The weird scraping sound the palm leaves made in the breeze used to increase my fear. To me, the lone palm tree was, at night, the devil himself.

My friends had told me that ghosts would run away scared if slippers, brooms, or fire were used.

One day, my younger sister Kala suddenly stared wide-eyed at me and rolled her eyes continuously. Then, laughing unnaturally and loudly, and while dressed in her own clothes she repeatedly pulled on and peeled off my father's and brother's shirts. I was the only one at home at that time and at first thought she was joking or playing the fool. As time passed and Kala did not become her old self but carried on in a weird fashion, it suddenly occurred to me that Kala was possessed. I did not know what to do. I could not run away as Kala sat unmoving in the doorway with her hair loose and dishevelled. Appa had gone to Marandai and my elder brother was at Sivaganga College. My younger brother and Malathi had just then gone out while Amma had gone to fetch potable water from the pond at Sambai. I wondered what to do. I called out Kala's name. She appeared not to hear but kept muttering to herself. I went up to her. There was a broom near the doorway where Kala was sitting. There were also slippers lying there. I gripped and hit Kala all over violently. Even now I do not know how I ran out of the house. I behaved as I did because I had been told that hammering a person with slippers and brooms got rid of spirits.

Kala, unable to bear the pain, screamed 'Amma! Appa! Amma! Appa!' and crying, fell from the steps into the house. After some time, I crept near the doorway and peered inside. Kala had fallen asleep. Just as Amma returned, it started raining heavily. Whenever it rained, our duty was to put pots, pans, and old sacks under the leaking spots and keep the house dry. Kala also got up and, as always, arranged the vessels along with me. It was then that I told my mother what had happened. That night, Amma gave me the New Testament and asked me to keep it under my head. She also recited 'Our Father, who art in Heaven'. She made Kala keep repeating 'Go away Satan'. From then on there were no spirits.

We sang 'Oh Heart! Praise and pray to Him who was born in Bethlehem'.

If we were ever asked of our caste, our parents had instructed us to say that we were Christians. They believed that the caste mentality of Hindus was not greatly prevalent amongst Christians.

No one from my family had even once gone to the Rasula Samudram Church. Only I, at the invitation of my friend Wilson, had been there to sing Christmas and New Year hymns. It was also there that I sang my compositions on Jesus Christ based on film tunes. A Muslim friend played the drums. 'Tea Master' Hussain Bhai also used to join the singing. We even gave a concert at the Vazhividu Pillayar Temple for coconuts or paltry returns.

Most of the men of the Muslim households lived abroad. We would be given money to read aloud their letters. We were also paid to write letters, asking them to send money for their children's needs, as much as three rupees to write such letters. The older Muslim girls of Salayur houses used to weave mats of *korai* grass. They would pay us when we took the mats and sold them to Multhadiyan's shop or to N.H. Jalal's shop. Sometimes, they would pay for readings of the story of the Prophet from Tamil books as they wove their mats. They would say 'Buy books like this' or 'Gunasekhara, you go see the movie and come back and tell us the story' and give us cash. Even for narrating the film story or for singing songs we would be rewarded: 'Listening to your songs as we were weaving has made time fly. Go and buy yourself *paniyaram* and tea from Chekkadiyathan's tea shop and after you have finished eating, bring some back for us too.'

When I was young and used to tell them the stories from the films, the girls liked MGR best. I preferred Sivaji Ganesan. If I heard a good song being broadcast on the radio as I was going to school, I would stand and listen and move on only after it was over.

I earned money by selling neem seeds to Multhadiyan's shop and with that I learnt hired a cycle and learnt how to use it. One could reach Paramakudi only by going past a town called Kumarakuruchi. The people of Kumarakurichi were notorious for picking up fights and even dared to stop buses that went through their town. All of us, Khaja, Jehangir, Mustafa, and I would be terrified as we neared this town and could breathe easy only after crossing Kumarakurichi.

Sports Day was held annually at school. Prizes for fancy dress, singing, debates, essay competitions, and other such events were also distributed

on that day. I never missed getting at least one prize in the events in which I took part. I would come first in the 100-metre, 200-metre, and relay races. A week before Sports Day, as advised by my brother Karunanidhi, I would practise walking on my toes. Then, like a released coil-spring, one could run fast. My cousin Muniyandi and my brother Karunanidhi, who had also attended the same school, had, like me, excelled in sports and had won the Champions Cup. Several big-wigs used to take part in the 1,000-metre race that would be held for the public. A person from Keezhayur would come regularly to participate in that event. He was the only dark-skinned—almost jet-black—participant. The rest were all light-skinned Muslims. Most ran the first four rounds slowly and the fifth lap fast. The Keezhayur man would run fast steadily from start to finish and eventually win the race. When he received the prize, everybody would remark he was from the Keezhayur Colony.

When I was in the SSLC, the Jamaat decided that a college should be built in Illayankudi and donations were collected. A plan was drawn up to collect donations through cultural events. Khader Gani, the Tamil teacher, decided to stage the play 'The Valiant Tipu Sultan'. Another teacher, Shahjehan Gani, created a realistic stage set of a crouching tiger with vivid colours in papier-mache. I was the main singer in that drama. Even though I failed in the SSLC maths exam that year, because I contributed to activities that would help to build the college, I was allowed to rejoin the school the next year. Anybody who had failed was normally not allowed to continue in the Ilayankudi High School. You may recall my mentioning a good football player. He was the Paris-returned 'Paris' Jamaal. One day he told my father, 'Sir, Gunasekharan sings extremely well. Mahendran, the film director, is the son of the nurse of our Ilayankudi Government Hospital. If we take this boy to him, he will be successful in the cinema world. Shall I do it?' My father was quite willing. His nephew—my father's elder sister's son—Muniyandi, was then studying medicine. It was my father and his brother who had paid for his education right from childhood. It was that cousin, Dr Muniyandi, who advised my father not to do so. It was because of him that I continued with my studies.

—Translated by Tara Murali

Philanthropist Pe.Ma. Maduraipillai (1858–1913)

Anbu Ponnoviam

The history of a nation does achieve importance through that of an individual. For instance, it cannot be denied that the history of India has been enriched by individuals like Buddha, King Ashoka, and Saint Valluvan. Their doctrines of love, acts of kindness, and teaching of discipline will always be revered by people. We are able to observe that this has become their history, the history of their country while holding a special place in the history of the world as well.

Not everyone who is born achieves distinction. Nor does everyone who achieves distinction find a place in history. Noble people do not strive to attain importance in history. When they make sacrifices, placing duty foremost in their thoughts and deeds, they are respected by people. Some among them, due to the ravages of time, may or may not find a place in history. One such person was the respected Rangoon Maduraipillai.

Maduraipillai was born on 26 December 1858, as the third son of the honourable Pe. Markanamurthi who was a long-time resident of Vedhiyapuram, also known as Vepery in Chennai, and Raghunathapuram, also known as Paakkam; had worked for the people, received many certificates and prizes in his political activities and had served as the Madras Club secretary and contractor. Many small Tamil literary works refer to him with honour as 'the pride of ancient castes', 'one born of Thiruvalluvar lineage', and 'great personage born in the tradition of Thillai Sambaan'.*

In his youth, Maduraipillai grew up with elegance and dignity. At the age of seven he studied under Tamil pundits like Raghava Chettiar and Ganapathi Iyer. Then he went to Veppery SPS Christian School. Later, he went to Burma and studied there at St Paul's Secondary School. He then returned to Chennai and studied at the Christian College and became well-versed in English and Tamil.

Maduraipillai's elder aunt's son, Murugesan, was an expert in astrology. He also known as Petti Murugesan. Interesting stories

* See note on p. 178.

connected to his astrology have been related. Maduraipillai's elder brother was called Muthusami. At a young age, while studying, he was attracted to Buddhist doctrines and became a monk. When he was twenty-two years, he accepted monastic life, left home, and passed away without redeeming family ties.

Maduraipillai discontinued his college studies halfway and started working as a clerk at the governor's mansion. 'In 1877, when Lord Lytton who was the viceroy of the city of Delhi, organized a huge gathering on the occasion of the announcement of Queen Victoria as the empress of India.' Lord Buckingham, the governor of Chennai, attended the event with his retinue. On that occasion, Maduraipillai went with Lord Buckingham as an ordinary clerk.

Maduraipillai went to Rangoon in 1878. He worked there at an industrial company called Strong Steel as a clerk, an ordinary worker. Due to the qualities of punctuality, promptness in attending to his duties efficiently and in a manner benefitting the company, he soon became an officer there. Trustworthiness and discipline saw him progressing further. As a result, he became a very efficient top official.

He returned to Chennai in 1881. In accordance with his parents' wishes, on an auspicious day chosen by the elders, he married the respected lady, Ms Aadhilakshmi. He travelled again to Rangoon. However, he decided to venture into his own business. He started an import–export business called Ship Dubaash, Stevetain Merchant. His earlier qualities of diligence, integrity, good interpersonal manners, and his knowledge of the intricacies of trading, helped him progress rapidly. Apart from this, through his connection and goodwill among various industries, he learnt many indispensable business complexities. He read voraciously. He got in touch with Europeans and learnt many Western business strategies.

In 1890, he wished to go to foreign countries and observe at first-hand all the business procedures he had studied. Philanthropist Maduraipillai who left from Rangoon for foreign lands on 8 June, Thursday at one o'clock arrived at Calcutta, the capital of India on 12 June. He was given a grand reception there by Bengal babus like Mr Rajakrishna Mitter and the editor of *Indian Mirror*, Mr Sen, and all who had heard of his fame but were yet to meet him. The reception area was decorated so grandly that 'Indian courts paled in comparison. Likewise, in Allahabad, Bombay and later, in Baroda', rousing, grand, elaborate receptions were organized for him. From there, on 26 June, he left by ship together with

Gaikwad, the king of Burma. He had taken Rs 25,000 for his travel expenses. A century ago, this was a huge amount!

Philanthropist Maduraipillai first went to London. Then he went to Athens, Liverpool, Chester, Cornwall, Glasgow, Dundee, Newcastle, Sutherland, Richmond, Geneva, Naples, Venice, Baristova, Callais, Turkey, Belgium, Berlin, Frankfurt, Bremmen, Hamburg, Paris, Florence, Rome, Cairo, and many other cities, and surveyed them. In all these places his business contacts welcomed and praised him.

Before attending the reception in Rome, Maduraipillai visited the Pope. He sought the Pope's blessings for all Indians to progress in industrial ventures. After travelling for two months he returned to India.

Due to the success in business, his family prospered. As a result of his tireless work, he amassed great fortune. Generous and kind-hearted by nature, he did a great deal to help the poor. He played a significant role in religious and social fields.

In 1886, in Vepery, Chennai, in order to fulfil a request by the local Saivites and Vaishanavites, he organized an association called, Veppery Sathvishayadana Sangam to promote unity among the poor. Acceding to the request of Chennai Dvidathvadananda Siva Bhajanaiyar, he bore the expenses for the renovation of the Oothukattamman shrine. Without being narrow-minded, he helped institutions run by Christians and Muslims as well.

In 1896, when Pillai came to Chennai, he went personally to Athular Business Education Association in the Thousand Lights district run by Reverend John Ratnam who worked hard for the progress of the Adi Dravidas. Pillai not only offered financial assistance, but also did the necessary to promote goodwill throughout all Adi Dravidar associations.

In 1905, when the Prince of Wales visited Rangoon with his consort, Maduraipillai organized a reception and, accompanied by his granddaughters, Meenambal and Saradambal, welcomed the dignitaries in a pavilion that was decorated to resemble the *gopuram* of Madurai temple. In 1911, he was invited by the Viceroy of India as a special guest to participate in Delhi Durbar, a function attended by the British prince.

From 1885 till 1900, he was the Rangoon Municipality Commissioner. For about twenty-five years he served as the Honorary Judge, second division. At the request of Indian Viceroy, Lord Elgin, he constructed a separate building, Maduraipillai Block, for the Rangoon Dameron Hospital.

He was introduced to King George V as an excellent social worker. Esteemed poets of ancient tribes have composed poems in praise of him and received many valuable gifts. Christian and Muslim poets too, have sung in praise of him. *Madurai Prabandham*, a book of more than a thousand pages containing poems composed by more than five hundred poets, bears testimony to his fame even today.

This leader of philanthropists, who was the guardian of Adi Dravidas, passed away in 1913.

—*Translated by Prabha Nair*

ARCHIVES

An Argument Against Conversion

Iyothee Thass

To
The Hon'ble S. Srinivasa Raghava Aiyangar
Dewan Bhadur CIE
Inspector General of Registration
Madras

Sir,

In your recent report to our gracious Government, on a poor class of people who were anciently known as 'Dravidians'* but who are now called Pariahs, you have made a remark that these people can make no progress but by becoming either Christians or Mahommedans. Though a consideration of the motive of this remark leads me to the clear conclusion, that you have thus remarked, as knowing as you do their present deplorable condition, you have the good intention at heart of wishing them every success, yet the particular good that may result from a change of their religion is not perceived by me. To learn this, therefore, from you and get my doubt cleared I have undertaken to bring the following facts to your notice.

The Christians are divided as is well known, into Catholics and Protestants. In some of the Catholic churches separate seats are assigned for Pariahs, and as they are often despised as low caste men, their

* Contrary to the simplistic use of the term referring to non-Aryans as found in the Dravidian political rhetoric, Iyothee Thass always used the term meaning, 'casteless Tamils', 'the original inhabitants of the Tamil land', who followed a non-Hindu tradition and culture having Jain-Buddhist leanings.

feelings are much wounded thereby. Even in the Protestant churches of some countries they are likewise insulted and sometimes excluded from Church and Lord's Supper. Besides this, the members of this community who have retired from Government service on pension are particularized as Pariah Christians. It does not appear that even those Christians who at the present day, have risen to high position, have done as simply because they became Christians; but, on the other hand, there is reason to suppose that they have so risen by securing to themselves good and decent appointments by means of the education bestowed on them by the Missionaries, who gave them food and clothing as well.

As for the progress this community would make by becoming Mahommedans, it is a thing well known to all that the Mahommedans as a class are going backward, as regards their education, and this fact has already attracted the attention of our benign Government, which has therefore made some special concessions to them. Under the circumstances I do not know what worse condition the Pariahs will come to, if, by becoming Mahommedans, they are to share the hardships of born Mahommedans.

These then, are the several grave doubts I have entertained in connection with your proposal. But allow me to explain briefly the real cause of the backward condition of the Dravidian people who are called Pariahs, as far as I, a member of this community, have been able to ascertain it from my own personal experience.

First, in practice, the proclamation of 1858 made by our Gracious Sovereign, the Empress Victoria and the Statutes passed by the Houses of Parliament in 1833 regarding India, are so applied that I am rather led to believe that these enactments are intended for all except the Pariahs. For, when a high caste man commits the serious crime of torturing people and robbing them of their jewels and other valuables, and is sentenced to undergo imprisonment in the jail, he is made to perform no degrading work. But, if a Pariah having nothing to eat, commits the trifling crime of stealing a handful of rice or paddy and is made to undergo imprisonment, he is forced to do the degrading work of a *thoti* or scavenger, which work he has not done at any time before in his life. By this treatment the unfortunate sufferer, his friends and relations, and even those who have read section 464 of the jail code, are led into a belief that under the British rule the Pariahs have no right whatever to make any progress, nor to any fair play, and that they cannot but remain disheartened and humbled always to the very dust, without ever having to rejoice at any progressive step.

Second, in Sections 428 and 434 of a book called the Epitome of Law in Tamil relating to village officers, it is stated that such class of men as carpenters, goldsmiths, blacksmiths, etc., should not be put under wooden fetters (called *tholoovoo*), but only Pariahs for the space of 6 hours. The day-labourers as well as owners of small piece of land among this class who have read the provision contained in these sections and who have witnessed the hardships caused by its working, become afraid of their caste neighbours and ever shrink from the thought of making progress in civilization and material comforts. For, the illiterate caste villagers not regarding these unhappy people as human beings treat them always like brutes, and when once a Pariah appears before them with any marks of improvement about him, he is at once accused of some crime or other and made to bear the wooden fetters. This tyranny, no doubt, lasts every time for the space of six hours only accordingly to the law, still, these unhappy people are almost cowed down by the gear that their caste villagers have it in their power to bring into operation, at the same time, the further ruling, that escape from the above tyranny renders the criminal liable for punishment under Section 224 of the Indian Penal Code.

The fear of power and the cruel act on the part of the caste villagers whereby the members of the community are lent small sums of money at a high rate of interest for marriage or funeral expense and then made slaves—though no marks of slavery are ever presented to the outside world; and lastly, the difficulty created by Mirasi right secured by the caste people previous to the introduction of the Revenue Settlement Act when they grew jealous to the extreme degree at the thought that these people could make some progress by land acquisitions—all these are so many effective obstacles in their way of making any progress as tillers of ground.

Third, when the Europeans first conquered this country and, with a view of improving it as well as the means of communication, organized the army of sappers and miners, the high caste men did not enlist themselves in it, partly because they thought they would lose their caste by foreign travels and partly because they thought that levelling mounds of earth, filling up ditches, and felling trees were degrading to them. But the Dravidians called Pariahs, who had no such scruples came forward and enlisted themselves in large numbers. They opened roads through forests and over hills; they were the first to stand bravely before all the battle that took place in those days and to undergo all the hardships and privations of a cruel war; and in short, they served their European

masters always truly and faithfully. In consideration of such meritorious service they were given high appointments in the army and they and their relatives for a time led a life of decent competency, and, with the help of the pension bestowed on them in old age, were able to give to their children somewhat liberal education and to make them rise in the scale of civilization. But, now, to leave these people as it were no longer in the enjoyment of such comfort and happiness and to prevent their further progress, the high caste men, who once refused to enlist themselves in this battalion as they thought they would lose their caste thereby, have begun to do so to a large extent. By this all hopes of obtaining high appointments in the army and rising to position are lost to the members of this class, and their gradual banishment from the battalion is the result.

Fourth, when hospitals were first established, to render medical aid both to troops and civil subjects, the high caste men, thinking it would be quite unbecoming them as caste men to dissect dead bodies and dress the wounds and sores of men of all nationality, did not try for appointment in hospitals as apothecaries, dressers, etc. The members of this community alone offered themselves up for this service. In rendering medical aid to the troops during the time of war and in ministering unto the wants of the subjects in general whenever they became ill, they worked truly and honestly for the benefit of the government. With the help of the decent pay they got for their good service and of the pension obtained in old age, they and their families were not only able to live in affluence but were also able to educate their children. But now this profession is closed for them. There is no means of proving that now-a-days at least at the rate of one per annum their young men enter the Government service as dressers. This is because the very caste men who once regarded it as unbecoming on their part to dress sores have entered the Medical profession in great majority.

Fifth, the members of this community who live in the villages have for ages been serving faithfully protectors of their masters' property. Such faithful men are scarcely allowed to enlist themselves as city policemen and as salt and *abkari* policemen, who draw better emoluments of pay for their services. Even if they are allowed to do so, their Pariah nationality is made to stand as a bar to their getting higher appointments in that department and as a cause of their ruin.

Sixth, it will be clear from the foregoing remarks that at all placed whence money and health is to be got, a caste man has no caste to observe, but a Pariah alone has his low caste always to stand in his way wherever he goes to get money or to preserve his health. He is thus

excluded from sharing every thing that is good and useful and forced to remain always in a degraded condition. He cannot even claim to live healthily. Within the municipal limits of Madras there is a village called the Hall's Garden which is solely peopled by this race. The benefits of a municipality are not extended to it; for, it has no metalled roads, not has it drains or water pipes. The filthy water which the people use soaks into the ground and during the rainy season an offensive smell emanates from the ground which pollutes the air they inhale. They therefore become often subject to various kinds of disease and get their health more and more impaired. If such is the state of a village within municipal limits what the state of the surrounding villages, outside the municipal limits, which are peopled by this race will be, is easily imagined.

To add to their misery, two or three arrack shops or toddy shops are opened near every village peopled by this race, and the poor men are tempted to drink away their meagre earnings for which they labour hard, and to starve their wives and children. But where can they get the sense to see their own folly and aim at bettering their wretched condition? It is essentially reason that enables man to better his condition and obtain happiness. But the means of developing this greatest of human excellencies are riches, bodily health, and learning, which are the three things that these people stand greatly in need of. With a mind doomed to ignorance they cannot think otherwise than that all the benefits of a municipality, viz. clean metalled roads, good cemented drainage and two or three fine water pipes in every street are reserved for the high caste men, who occupy high and spacious homes, and the low caste men, who are confined to low and humble cottages, cannot claim such privileges, even though they regularly pay the taxes levied by the municipality or other authorities.

Seventh, among the members of this community who live in the surrounding villages, those who till the ground for others, though they work hard under a tropical sun from early morning to dusk in the evening, can hardly get more than a rupee or two per month. This hardly suffices to keep them alive and clothe them. In consequence they are reduced to mere skeletons. Though they thus work hard and conscientiously for their masters, the caste men give them in return not even permission to draw fine drinking from their wells. These unhappy people are forced to drink filthy rain water which collects itself into ponds and pools and to fall victims to various diseases. The rest of them, who leaving their abodes in the villages enter a town to seek a living, take up appointments as domestic servants under Europeans and receive wages from six to

twelve rupees a month. But as they are wanted to dress cleanly and to keep themselves neat and tidy the pay is, in majority of cases, scarce sufficient to procure them food and necessary clothing, and they can save almost nothing for future use. God only knows the hardships they and their families undergo on account of food and clothing, in the interval between quitting an appointment and getting another. In this state they continue to serve their European masters faithfully and diligently and also share their pleasures and sorrows even from the time of their arrival from Europe. They work daily from 6 in the morning to 10 or 12 in the night thus awaking for several hours every day. Sometimes they have to perform along with their masters long and tedious journeys through jungles and across mountains, and to accompany their masters even as far as England. Though in this manner they serve their masters faithfully through weal and woe, they can get nothing to support them in their old age and by continual starvation they meet death at last. Neither are they in a position to educate their children. Their masters always keep knocking about from place to place, stopping, for instance, for six months in Madras, six months in Ooty, two months at Cuddapah, four months at Salem, and so on. They (servants) are unable to leave their children behind to remain always in one place getting education, as they have no money to meet the expenses in the shape of food and clothing, school fees, and books, required for their children. So they take their wives and children always with them wherever they go. In consequence, the children when they grow to manhood are fit only to follow their fathers in their profession. Or, even when they get no transfers during employment if the master returns home or they lose their appointment just at the time their children begin to make some progress in education, they are obliged to take away their children from school, as they have no money to pay for their further education, and from that time to train them to their own work.

In this manner many of the young men of this community were, for want of timely help from their parents, obliged to learn the duties of a domestic servant. As they know no other work, and as the appointments as domestic servants are limited, their distress is very great. As far as I have been able to ascertain the numbers, there are:

Butlers	148
Dubashies	112
Cooks	201
Maties	108

who are now out of employment within the municipal limits of Madras.

The number of those who are out of employment in other profession and of those out of all manner of employment in other places, I am not able to give.

Among those who suffer thus with their wives and children for their food and clothing, there are also Christians. I do not understand, therefore how Pariahs could make any progress by embracing other religions. To feed at an ancient grudge, the caste people began to despise the members of this community by branding them with the degrading name of 'Pariah' and tried to throw every possible impediment in their way to progress. Under such unbearable tyranny these people were the first to embrace Christianity when it came into the land. Then, by a liberal expenditure of mission money they began to grow in civilization. Seeing this and becoming extremely jealous, the caste men too became converts to Christianity, and at once began to despise the Christian converts of the community as 'Pariah Christians', and to ruin all their prospects as Christians. There is every reason to support that in the same manner they will be despised as 'Pariah Mahommedans' if they become Mahommedans, but the dream that by so becoming they would rise in the estimation of their caste neighbours and rise above their present degraded condition can never be realized.

Their true and only way to progress, then is to get (now and then) support from well educated gentlemen among the caste people and to obtain special concessions from the hands of our British rulers who administer impartial justice unto all, without making the distinction of caste, creed, or color. This resolution was arrived at after deep consideration and the ten concessions asked for the advancement of this race were already laid before the public through the Indian National Congress of 1891. There is besides a proposal to seek aid to educate this class through the Mahajana Sabha, to establish Dravidamahajana Sabhas in several districts, and by getting representatives from those sabhas to convene a monster meeting to represent to government directly their other wants and grievances.

The antipathy of those who call themselves Brahmins towards those who are called Pariah is notorious; and it is no secret thing that the Brahmins have been always placing every obstacle in the Pariah's way to progress. While you, sir, a Brahmin, have now come forward with a report on the Pariahs as if you meant thereby to plead their cause. Our

people, therefore, are beset with a grave doubt whether any good or evil may be the result of your report.

While under this Government other communities have made progress without changing their religion you have without any difficulty made a suggestion that Pariahs alone should become either Christians or Mahommedans to make any progress; but I cannot see the benefits that could arise to them from your proposal. I therefore humbly beg that you will let me know them, since I (a member of this community) desire to know them first before proceeding to ascertain if there are any other benefits to be derived by adopting other suggestions, with a view of bettering the condition of this downtrodden nation.

Yours obediently,
Pundit C. Iyothee Thass,
S1, Ammaiappa Mudaly Street,
Rayapettah
(This was probably written in 1894.)

A Unique Petition

Iyothee Thass

To
Colonel H.S. Olcott, FTS
Adyar, Madras

Reverend and Dear Sir,

At the request of many educated men of my community, I beg to call your attention to the following grievances which we experience as regards religion at the hands of the so-called high caste men, and to request that you may be pleased to help us with your advice in the matter.

It is our earnest desire to revive Buddhism in this presidency and the following explanation of the way in which the Brahmins are treated in villages will enable you to understand the former social and religious position of the people who are now termed Panchamas and the reasonableness of our above mentioned wish.

If those who are known as Brahmins enter the villages and streets occupied by our people, who were the original Dravidians, but now called Panchamas by the Hindu high caste men, they (Brahmins) are driven out of the place in the most disgraceful manner amidst tumult and uproar, on the ground that the spots stepped on by them have become polluted. The measure adopted to eradicate the impurity thus caused is to cleanse the places trodden by these so-called Brahmins by means of cow-dung and the pots used for such purposes are destroyed beyond the limits of such towns. This treatment is similar to the one done when a person is dead and the body removed from the house. Should these people enter the streets of the Brahmins, they are driven out, but menial servants such as cobbler, washerman, *totty*, barber etc., are allowed to converse with them (Brahmins, etc.) freely and to enter their houses. When the so-called high caste men see these people, they become irritated and begin to scorn them, and they try their utmost to keep them down in the social scale. Such is the hatred between the two classes of people. This kind of malpractice has been in existence from time immemorial. I began to enquire into the cause for such animosity between the two classes from the time I could think myself. On one occasion while I was travelling in the Coimbatore district I came across a bundle of Tamil palm-leaf manuscripts. Among those, I found a collection of 570 stanzas *Naradiya Purana Sangai Thelivu*. They relate to the interpretation of one of the stanzas given out by a sage named Aswakosa to whom it was referred by two other sages Kakkaipadiniar and Nallurandar and the following is briefly the reply given by the above named sage Aswakosa.

There was once a great battle between the people of Puruseka, the worshippers of Agni and those of Vanga country in which the former being completely vanquished and put to flight, took refuge on the banks of the Sindhural river, and gradually made their way into the Dravidian country, where they began to spend their lives at the outset as mendicants. Seeing the good manners, customs, and civilization of the Dravidians, these new settlers mingled with them.

Although the original Dravidians were divided into different dynasties such as the Andhra, Karnatic, Maharashtra, and Dravidian dynasties, they contracted marriages and ate together without any distinction.

Monasteries were erected over the graves of philosophers and great men, which were termed Matam such as Thenkasi Matam, Poothoor Matam, Tirupuli Matam, etc. In these sacred houses, the Dravidian

yogi lived and preached Buddhism. These yogis who were working for salvation wore threads to distinguish themselves from other social classes, namely, warriors, merchants, cultivators, etc. The latter used to prostrate themselves before the wearers of such threads as a mark of respect.

These new settlers, who were day by day minutely observing the civilization and unanimity of the Dravidians, thought it impossible to conquer them either by war or by any other means than stratagems. They began to forget even the language (Savagam) they were speaking and began to learn the vernacular languages (Andhra and Dravida) spoken by the Dravidians. They disguised themselves as sages, wearing the sacred thread of the Dravidians and said to the illiterate people and petty rajahs, 'We are Brahmins. We are priests. You should all obey us and give us whatever we require, so do the Shastras command.' They then taught the illiterate and most ignorant people some of the *slokas* they had picked up from the very language of the Dravidians.

Seeing the tricks and disguised of these Purusegas (fire-worshippers), the Dravidian sages and their followers had the curiosity to enquire into their origin and ultimately learnt that they were only masquerading as sages to deceive the people. As a punishment, for their roguery, they (Purusegas) were beaten and driven out wherever encountered and therefore, wherever the Pususegas saw two or three Dravidians going together, they for fear, they (Dravidians) would carry news to the Dravidian monks at the Matams, used to cry out *Parayappogurargal.* Parayappogurargal which literally means the tale-bearers are going, the tale-bearers are coming and this word, by frequent application and usage to their rivals became contracted into 'Paraiah' and hence it has come to mean a low-born man.

These cunning Purusegas however with the help of the illiterate people and petty rajahs whose passion then had played upon, became powerful and began to demolish the Matams, burning all the sacred books containing Lord Buddha's teachings they could get hold of. Not satisfied with this they began to chase the Dravidian monks and their followers hooting at them, calling them Paraiahs and instructing their followers to treat them contemptuously and to deny them shelter in their places.

When I read the above interpretation by Aswakosa that the so-miscalled Paraiahs were once followers of the Buddhist dharma, I began to search through the literatures of these so-called Paraiahs to try and

discover whether they had made any mention of Buddha. Not only did I find that the word *Puthagam* is given to the book that contains the teachings of Buddha; but I found also in the books *Kooral, Auttichevadi*, and *Konraivendan* (post-Sangam ethical texts) which teach moral lessons, in *Chintamani*, *Cilappadhigaram*, *Velayapathi*, *Koondalakesi*, and *Manimegalai*, the five *Kavyams*, in *Tholkappiyam*, *Agatyiam*, and *Nannulu*, the grammars and in the twelve *Nighandoos* (grammatical texts), etc., that the authors touch upon the Buddha Gnanam and that the introductory stanza of each of their works contains an ascription to Buddha.

From these, it is evident that the so termed Paraiahs were formerly of the Buddhist faith. The medical and other works compiled by Agastya, Bogur, Poolipani, Thanvendari, etc. were in their possession in manuscripts till the introduction of printing when they were published to the world. Not only were our people in possession of these works, but they also studied *Arunkalai* known as *Bhagavadgita,* the teaching of the first Buddha, and they practised *yogasathanum.*

From the above facts, it is clear to us that our people once professed Buddhism and now it is our heartfelt desire that we should be shown how to return to our old Buddhist faith only in its primitive purity. We have been planning to form a society under the designation of Dravida Buddha Sangam and through its instrumentality to bring our pamphlets monthly which will show the teaching of the Lord Buddha as found in the literature of Buddhism and to circulate them as widely as possible.

For thus alone we believe, can we hope to restore our self-respect and to gain that right, to win by our own exertions, domestic comforts, and untrammelled personal liberty of action, which are denied to us in the Hindu social system of caste, under the weight of which we are now and for many centuries have been crushed into the dust.

I, therefore, at the request of all the educated men of my community, humbly beg that you will be pleased to patronize our undertakings and show us how we may accomplish our blameless object.

Madras, Rayapettah — I am, etc.

8 June 1898 — Yours obediently
Pundit Iyothee Thass
(From *Journal of the Mahabodhi Society*, Vol. VII, No. 3, pp. 23–4)

Against Conducting ICS Exams in India

Rettamalai Srinivasan

The paper referring to the meeting held at Pachiappa's Hall to protest against the resolution passed by the secretary of state on the subject of the civil service exam being held in India, writes as follows: As the result of a memorial signed by 3,412 Pariahs having been submitted to parliament through General Chesney protesting against the civil service examination being held in India, the just and merciful English parliament, taking the memorial into its due consideration, came to the conclusion that should the civil service examination be held in India, Brahmins alone would prove to be successful candidates and fill high offices and thought that Brahmins are a selfish class, caring only for their good and totally unmindful of the good of other classes. All those members of parliament who were prepared to advocate the cause of India have resolved never to believe the doings of the Congress after pursuing the Pariya memorial under reference. It would appeal Dadabhai Nowroji, apprehending that the Pariya memorial in question would damage the cause of the Congress, wrote to the Madras Congress Committee thereupon, thinking that their real traits of character had been exposed, met at Pachiappa's Hall, howled, and made a hubbub even as dogs do at the moon. With the exception of the Hon'ble Mr P. Rungiah Naidu, Diwan Bahadur P. Subramania Aiyar, Mr Norton, the Hon'ble Mr Sankara Nair, the Hon'ble Mr Kaliyanasundaram Aiyar, Messrs G. Subramania Aiyar, Viraraghava Chariar, V. Krishnam Chariar, P.S. Sivasami Aiyar, A. Rajagopal Aiyar, M. Venkataramaiah Chetty, G. Paramasivam Pillay, B.R. Sundaram Aiyar, W. Burton, R. Sivasankara Pandiyaji, R. Venakata Subba Row, and others; none of the merchants and artisans in Madras made their appearance, nor were the Mohammadans present on the occasion. One Muhammadan gentleman, who was associated with these persons, was absent from the meeting, pleading illness as an excuse for this absence. Neither Pariyas nor native Christians made their appearance. None of the many classes of men living in southern India were present on the occasion. The audience chiefly consisted of the students of Pachiappa's College, the Madras Christian College, and the Presidency College. The Hon'ble Mr Rungiah Naidu was in the chair. We have already written in our columns that all the attempts in respect of the simultaneous examination on the part of the Brahmans and other men protesting to belong to high classes are like making a dead snake dance. Our speaking on this subject, now, is like beating a dead snake. Nevertheless, let us allude to the speeches made by some of the gentlemen present at the said sham meeting which consisted of school boys and the persons above referred to. The speeches complained of the unjustness of the opinion which was expressed by the secretary of state with a view to prevent the natives from holding high offices, in as much as Her Majesty, the Queen Empress of India, made a solemn promise while taking charge of the Government of India into her hands that Hindus and Englishmen would be treated and protected alike and that nothing would stand in the way of the Hindus filling all the high offices of the state on a par with English men if they should only qualify themselves for such offices by their education and ability without being influenced by differences of castes and creed.

It is but right that they complain like this; and it is equally right that the law exists as it does. As with the exception of the Brahmins among the Hindus and the Baboos of Bengal the other classes of the community are wanting in education and ability to fill high offices, as the Muhammadans, the Pariyas of southern India, and the Kshatriya classes of Northern Western Provinces, who are against the Brahmans and the Bengali Baboos, object to their being ruled by men other than Europeans, and as the Muhammdans and Pariyas do not like the idea that the Brahmins should have the exclusive enjoyment of the privileges granted by Her Majesty's proclamation which is applicable to all classes of the Hindu community, it is but right that the secretary of state for India has objected to the civil service exam being held in India. The Hon'ble Mr Sankara Nayar* boldy asserted that resolution of the secretary of state was wrong, as it was based on the argument that the Hindus are unable to govern, being influenced by prejudices arising from differences of caste, and added that the Hindus do not allow themselves to be biased by caste prejudices. We never expected such a false statement to drop from the lips of the Hon'ble Mr Sankara Nayar. Perhaps his eyes have become so dull as not to perceive the notice on the board near the premises of the Brahmin judge of our high court prohibiting the Pariyas

* Mr Sankara Nayar (1857–1934) was the president of the Indian National Congress in 1897. In the 'Minutes of Dissent' that he submitted on Indian Constitutional Reforms, he pointed out the defects of the British rule. He was known for his radical views and powerful critique of Gandhi's non-cooperation movement in his book, *Gandhi and Anarchy* (1922) but was criticized for ignoring issues related to 'untouchable' communities.

from passing in the neighbourhood of his quarters. The Hon'ble Mr Sankara Nayar would have noticed a number of unjust cases like that in which 300 Pariyas were unjustly punished sometime ago. Is he not aware of the order promulgated some years ago by the native state of Travancore forbidding the Pariyas, the Charumars, the Pulayas, the Shanas, and other low caste men from passing by public roads? Can he ignore the manner in which the Pariyas and other low caste men in the mofusil are ill-treated? As he gave utterance to such statements publicly with a view to please the Brahmins at Pachiappa's Hall in spite of his knowledge of the facts above recited, he may be likened to a cat closing his eyes while drinking milk. Who is this person? What class of men did he represent when he spoke? Did he represent the Malayalis? It does not become his dignity and character to speak disparagingly of the Pariyas for the purpose of ingratiating himself into the favour of the Brahmins. We never expected him to talk so thoughtlessly. Of those who spoke on that evening it was Diwan Bahadur S. Subramania Aiyar alone spoke with sense. He said that is would take a long time before it would be reasonable to grant the Hindus the concessions they ask for and that the people of this country would acquire the ability to administer justice when the time to grant those concessions shall arrive. What he says is true. The British government will grant our prayer and leave the country in our possession when our countrymen divest themselves of all the prejudices relation to religion, caste, and so forth and try to work as the people of one common country with feelings of brotherhood having for their object the public weal. What is the use of our men making hubbub as being the members of the Congress, being subject to the machinations of the Brahmins? We are at a loss to see the reason why the other classes of the community do not perceive the machinations practised by the Brahmins with a view to occupy even under British rule the supremacy which they held during the reign of the Hindu rajas. Their agitation about the simultaneous exams* is owing to the fact that they observe the other classes of community also begin to enjoy the fruits of higher education, that they apprehend the other classes within a short space of time reach the high position which they hold and that they desire to

* Reports of the continuous campaigns of the Indian National Congress headed by Dadabhai Naoroji demanding the conduct of civil service examinations both in India and in London during the last two decades of the nineteenth century appeared in the nationalist newspaper *Swadesamitran*. But the counter-campaigns conducted by the 'untouchables' demanding the conduct of civil service examinations only in London were reported in the magazine *Parayan*.

monopolize all the high offices under the British rule before the lower classes shall qualify themselves for such posts. In these circumstances the resolution arrived at by our rulers on this subject is just and proper. The English at a considerable sacrifice of their armed men waged war with the barbarous Hindu rajas of the wicked Mohammadan rulers, relieved us from the sufferings caused by them have established courts of justice and the police to enable us to lead a life of peace; have opened railway, telegraphic and postal communication; have given us the benefits of their learning and have conferred on us appointments. The government is prepared to give us higher appointments suited to our ability. It is by no means right to condemn Her Majesty's government without patience. Diwan Bahadur S. Subramania Aiyar* has spoken as an astrologer would speak. Mr Peter Paul Pillai, one of our class prated some nonsense at the meeting in Pachiappa's Hall about our memorial above alluded to.

(*Pariyan*, 22 September 1894, taken from *Native Newspaper Report* submitted to the British government, 1894)

Note Submitted to the Indian Central Committee Report (1929)

M.C. Rajah

It is often contended that these disabilities of 'untouchables' spring from deep-rooted social prejudices and that political remedies are of little avail against them. It is asserted that legislation and administration cannot force the pace of social reform, and premature efforts in that direction often retard progress. That was true when States were organized on a limited basis and operated in a limited perspective. But the modern State, organized on democratic basis, embraces every sphere of national and social activity, and as such is the most powerful engine of social reform. It not only embodies and preserves prevalent social ideas but by its

* S. Subramani Aiyar (1842–1924) was the founder of the Home Rule movement along with Annie Besant and the first Indian chief justice of Madras High Court. He submitted the issues of people to the Prince of Wales in 1875 and gave evidence before the Famine Commission in 1897.

credentials it is authorized to mould and direct social tendencies. Under the more advanced conditions in the Western countries it has taken upon itself the duty of caring for the old and training the young. It acts as an agency in the more equitable distribution of the national dividend. Free education, adult franchise, old age pensions, and unemployment insurance bear irrefutable testimony to its solicitude towards those who would, otherwise, under the relentless operation of economic laws soon become the Depressed Classes of Europe. The Government in India is progressing towards that ideal and must sooner than later face this task of levelling up. The history of the last hundred years has shown that education, transport, commerce, and political power have acted as solvents of age-long caste prejudices, and it is only by aiding the Depressed Classes to participate in an increasing measure in these activities that the stigma attaching to them could be removed. This is fully recognized in the evidence prepared by the Bombay government, where they admit

> the problem of Untouchability is not merely a social one. It has an important political aspect. Owing to the prevalence of untouchability a large section of population is denied the enjoyment of its legitimate civic rights. Untouchability, which is also peculiar to the Hindus, is intimately bound up with the caste system, and has therefore, in the minds of some people, a religious basis. The 'untouchable' or depressed classes, who form about a thirteenth part of the total population of the Presidency, are denied many of the ordinary civic rights and privileges (vide Memorandum prepared by the Government of Bombay for submission to the Indian Statutory Commission, 1928, p. 382).

The general remedy that suggests itself is the immediate and total withdrawal of legal and administrative recognition to the superstition of pollution. The laws as they are administered today uphold these superstitions and punishes the 'untouchables' who dare to disregard them. Whenever a member of the Depressed Classes attempts to enforce his civic rights, the law steps in under the guise of preserving the peach which, it fears, would otherwise be broken. In practice it amounts to legal protection to the superstition and denial of an elementary right to a member of the community. But, as this aspect is more concerned with internal legal reform and not with the main constitutional readjustment, I leave it with a mere indication. In the matter of political power the position of the Depressed Classes has to be safeguarded in (a) legislatures and (b) public services. I have already pointed out that in legislatures the Depressed Classes never had an opportunity of having

their voice heard till Lord Willingdon* nominated the first Adi Dravida member to his council in 1919. Later the number nominated was increased under the Reforms Act and today in most of the councils they have representatives who look after their interests. The suggested reform here is increase in numbers and change in method of representation so as to be more in consonance with democratic practice and better representative of the interests concerned. The change in the method is of more vital importance and demands closer attention. The method hereto followed was nomination by the governor, advised by his executive councillors, or either 'untouchables' themselves or those who in the opinion of the governor might be expected to look after their interests. The defects of this method are obvious, but it was first welcomed and later tolerated on the principle that the blabberer is preferable to the dumb. Nomination has lived its day of usefulness and has done its part in quickening political life in the community. The preference today is for the privilege of direct election. The nominated member, while he did voice the needs of his brethren, bore no representative character and had not the same living touch with those whom he represented as the elected member had. In the councils he was more prone to follow the lead of those who nominated him. He was not eligible for the ministry. In a predominantly elected chamber, the nominated members naturally tended to a second place. True, there was no legal difference in status, but their views did not carry the same weight, though their votes did. Nominated representation was welcomed when there was none and was accepted when there was not sufficient data to demand election. But the working of the reforms during the last ten years has demonstrated the future possibilities, and my demand is fully borne out by the conditions of today. There is one more reason why nomination must be abolished in

* Lord Willingdon (1866–1941), viceroy of India between 1931 and 1936, was known for his repressive measures and ordinances and for his clash with Gandhi. He had also served as governor of both Bombay and Madras. He got rousing receptions, especially among the downtrodden sections, during his tours for consolidating goodwill across the country. During his visit to Madras, the Depressed Class under the headship of Rettamalai Srinivasan and N. Sivaraj submitted felicitations. In a farewell address given to him on 5 April 1924, it was said: 'We of the Depressed Classes regard the British Government as the trustees of the people in India; that that one reason why the British Government should exist in India is to secure just treatment for the Depressed Classes and to stimulate and guide progress among the weaker communities' (quoted in M.C. Rajah, 1925, *The Oppressed Hindus*, The Huxley Press, p. 79).

the future and its validity from the constitutional point of view, I venture to say, could be hardly questioned. In the future councils, according to our recommendations, there is to be no nominated bloc. The chamber would consist only of elected members. Also the Governor's Executive Council would not be there. The government would be vested in the governor action with his ministers. So any nomination that the governor would make could only be on the advice of his Ministers. And the easiest way for the minister would be to get his party adherents nominated: and the constitutional device meant to protect the weaker elements would only serve as a means of co-option for the largest group in the council to the detriment of the community and government alike. The privilege of nomination vested in the hands of a political group would be nothing less than a menace. In recommending the system of nomination the statesmen of the day were not blind to its defects. They admitted the existence of these defects, but their only plea was that they had no alternative.

In assigning the number of seats in each Council to which non-official representatives may be appointed by nomination, we have been guided by existence of the important classes or interests which could not be expected to obtain representation by any practicable system of election. Thus we have been driven to the expedient of nomination for the representation of the Depressed Classes, because in no case did we find it possible to provide an electorate on any satisfactory system of franchise (vide para 24, Franchise/Committee Report).

That was what the Franchise Committee found in 1919. The Joint Parliamentary Committee had the same difficulty. The Depressed Classes appeared before Mr Montagu, but refused to go before the Franchise Committee, and said:

We would appear before the Franchise Committee provided the two persons, Messrs V.S. Sreenivasa Sastriar and Surendra Nath Bannerjee, to whose presence on the Committee we have already objected, are removed from the Committee during our appearance before it. We have already stated that Mr Sreenivasa Sastriar, as a champion and apologist of Brahmin oligarchy in preference to British bureaucracy, and Mr Bannerjee as one who advised our Sabha and the community which it represents 'to enlist themselves in the German army fighting against freedom and civilization because we said in our address to Lord Chelmsford and the Rt. Hon. Mr Montagu that we would fight to the last drop of our blood any attempt to transfer the seat of authority in this country from British hands to the so-called high caste Hindus who had been oppressing us in the past and would do so again but for the British Government,' are unfit to sit

in judgment over any representation we many make. If they continue to sit on the Committee, we have no other alternative as self-respecting and loyal citizens of the British Empire, than that of respectfully declining to appear before the aforesaid Committee (vide Appendix XV, Franchise Committee Report).

But conditions have improved considerably today. The representatives of the Depressed Classes waited in deputations and gave evidence before the Joint Conference at every centre in Indian and demanded that a definite step in the direction of democracy must be taken. It is suggested as a half-way measure that nomination might be made from a panel of members suggested by communal associations or electoral colleges, but the suggestion is open to the same objections. Added to them is the danger of mushroom or make-believe associations suggesting their own nominees and creating confusion.

A third alternative would be reservation of seats in joint electorates. It undoubtedly marks an advance on the present position but it is not altogether without objectionable features. In the total electorate the proportion of Depressed Class voters would be small. And the fear is not unnaturally entertained that the candidates who would fill the reserved seats would in reality be the nominees of the majority of the electorate. The constituencies being predominantly caste Hindu, no one could hope to get elected who did not pander to or at least respect caste prejudices. Again a Depressed Class member elected on the strength of caste Hindu votes would not be beholden to his community. There is thus the danger of the seats being occupied by the dummies of the higher castes. Such a result would largely nullify the power granted to the Depressed Classes in the shape of the franchise. Joint electorates if they are to work successfully require broadmindedness on the part of the majority community. It is my view that today such a favourable atmosphere does not exist.

The following evidence of the Depressed Classes Deputation before the Joint Conference in Bengal on 21 January 1929, will clear the position:

Q. 201. Is it not a fact that there are half-a-dozen Depressed Classes men who are members of the Provincial Council here in Bengal?
A. No, we have one nominated and two elected only, and those two came in with the other people.
Q. 202. Are not those two helping you?
A. No, not in the least.

Q. 203. Why?
A. Because they came in with the caste Hindus.
Q. 204. You mean because they came into the Council with the support of the caste Hindus?
A. Yes
Q. 205. And therefore they are subservient to the caste Hindus there?
A. Yes.
Q. 206. And they are not in a position to help you?
A. Not at all.

The creation of separate electorates* is the only other means which can ensure direct election and at the same time secure adequate protection. Objection, both theoretical and practical, are raised against the demand for separate electorates. But on closer examination they could be found to be not insurmountable and since the demand for it is only for a temporary period even these objections lose their validity. Theoretically, it is pointed out that separate electorates tend to perpetuate differences and hinder the growth of nationalism. There is weight in the objection but it is more than counterbalanced by the advantages secured under it. Separate electorates are not new to the Indian Constitution. The Muslims, the Sikhs, Indian Christians, Anglo-Indians, and Europeans possess them and they have given these communities a sense of security which alone has made all talk of advance possible. The peculiar position of the Depressed Classes today demands that their interests have to be protected against their Hindu co-religionists. In a common electorate where the voters were actuated by common interests division will follow opinions about the merits of the issues involved. But where conflict of interests is involved the voting will go by interests. When the existence of the conflict is accepted, it is clear that minority interests will never succeed in getting representation. The voter who happened to belong to the minority community would feel that his vote was being thrown away. He would even refuse to exercise his franchise when he is certain that the dice is already loaded against him. The resulting insecurity

* Even before Ambedkar put forth the demand of separate electorates for 'untouchables', M.C. Rajah raised it in 1929. But he stood by Gandhi when he went on a fast-unto-death for the abolition of Ambedkar's demand for a separate electorate and became instrumental in the signing of the Poona Pact which brought about the idea of reserved constituencies for the 'untouchables'.

will not conduce to communal harmony. Where he is afforded the protection of separate electorates this danger disappears. He is sure that whoever wins the election has been elected on the community's own votes and not by the votes of the caste Hindus. The vote would thus secure a value in his eye and would give him a sense of security. Political education would then be more rapid and the creation of sufficient self-confidence in the community would soon render the artificial protection unnecessary. The practical objections are less weighty. It is said that the creation of separate electorates is an impossible task as it is not possible to demarcate the Depressed Classes exactly in each province. This is hardly convincing. The existence of these classes is proved beyond doubt. All that is necessary is that the provincial governments should prepare the complete lists of classes who according to local custom and usage come under the category of 'Untouchables' and carve out constituencies for them. Such lists have already been prepared by the Governments in furnishing the information asked for by the late Lala Lajpat Rai. A suggestion was made that if it was known that Depressed Classes were being given special representation then there would be a scramble among some of the higher classes to get listed under the term 'Depressed'. This can hardly be so. It is inconceivable that for the sake of a vote any caste Hindu will be anxious to enroll himself in the Depressed Classes Register. 'Untouchables' live apart from others and there is no possibility of mixing the 'Untouchable' and the 'Touchable'. The next objection is that there are not sufficient voters, and that even the small number is so scattered as to make the task of carving out constituencies well-nigh impossible. Full data concerning the voters and how they are scattered has not been made available by all the governments. The Madras government, however, have given the whole data and an examination of the same shows that the difficulty is not imaginary.

Under the present electorate qualification the Depressed Classes in the Madras Presidency have 56,756 votes; the Muhammadans in Madras Presidency have 63,636 votes; Indian Christians have 24,860 votes; and Anglo-Indians have 2,816 votes; constituencies have been carved out for the Muhammadans, Indian Christians, and Anglo-Indians in the Madras Presidency; and they secure representation by election. The Muhammadans, with a voting strength of 63,636 elect 13; the Indian Christians with 24,860 votes, elect 7; the Anglo-Indians with 2,816 votes elect one. On the other hand, though the Depressed Classes have a voting strength of 56,756 this privilege is denied to them and their representation is secured by nomination.

The reforms officer of the Madras Government has supplied the Indian Statutory Commission with a statement showing the total number of Depressed Class voters in each district of the Madras Presidency (vide his letter of 25/28 February 1929). From this statement we find the voting strength of the Depressed Classes in Cuddapah, South Kanara, Malabar, and Nilgiris is under 500; in Bellary, Coimbatore, Kurnool, and Madras it is between 500 and 1,000; in Anantapore, North Arcot, Chittoor, Godavari West, Ramnad, Salem, Tanjore, and Trichinopoly is it between 1,000 and 2,000; in South Arcot, Chingleput, Ganjam, Guntur, Kistna, Nellore, and Tinnevelly it is between 2,000 and 3,000; in Madura it is between 3,000 and 4,000; in Godavari East it is between 4,000 and 5,000; and in Vizagapatam it is over 15,000. The total for the 26 districts is 56,756. This is with reference to the present restricted franchise. If the present franchise is enlarged, then there would be a rise in their voting strength.

From the above facts and figures it is very clear that the Government of Madras would experience no greater administrative difficulty in forming constituencies for the Depressed Classes than is experienced in making similar arrangements for the Muhammadans, Indian Christians, and Anglo-Indians. So even if the present franchise is maintained, it would certainly be possible to provide separate constituencies for the Depressed Classes in the Madras Presidency.

The Bengal Government, on page 11 of the report on the working of the Reformed Constitution in Bengal, 1921–7, have given this map:

> This shows the concentration or the density of the Depressed Classes population in the various Districts or Divisions of Bengal, and the map gives a very clear idea as to the formation of Separate Constituencies for the Depressed Classes in Bengal. In the Committee I Proposed Separate Electorates for the Depressed Classes in Bengal. Four members of the Committee votes for separate Electorates and the other four voted against it.

In this connection let me quote what the Minority Report of the Reforms Enquiry Committee signed by Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru, Sir P.S. Sivaswamy Iyer, Mr M.A. Jinnah, and Dr R.P. Paranjpye says on this question. It says:

> As regards the representation of the Depressed and working classes, we are of the opinion that the correct principle to follow would be to lower the franchise so as to give them a chance, through the open door of election in general electorates; but where practical considerations point to a different conclusion, we would suggest that for the next few years only special constituencies might be formed for them. (Report of the Reforms Enquiry Committee, p. 180[c])

In finally deciding this question, out committee have recommended separate electorates in the Madras Presidency for ten years and reservation of seats in joint electorates in the other provinces. I wanted separate electorates for ten years in all provinces.

Dalit Leaders' Work in the Field of Education

T.P. Kamalanathan

'A timely benefit though thing of little worth,
The gift itself—in excellence transcends the earth.'
—Thirukural

Before narrating the work of Dalit leaders, it is wiser to say about the services rendered by the voluntary agencies in the field of education to ameliorate the Depressed Classes.

Suffice it to say that the Christian mission agencies were the first to labour among the Depressed Classes in the education field. They brought miraculous change among the downtrodden by giving proper education. What is that miraculous change?

Rev. G.E. Phillips gives a narration as:

> It is known to everyone that the majority of the Indian Christians are of outcaste origin. Yet in the Government 'Statistics of Literacy' we find the proportion of Christians able to read and write is only excelled by that of the Brahmins, the hereditary scholars of the country, and the Christians are pressing the Brahmins close. In female education the Christians are far away and ahead of any other Indian community except small and select company of Parsees.*

It is said, that out of every twelve who receive the BA degree from Madras University, one is a Christian, and there are now over 1,000 Indian Christian graduates in south India alone. Many of these are of outcaste descent. In striking contrast stands the following laconic

* Rev. G.E. Phillips, 1912, *The Outcaste Hope*, p. 84.

sentence from last year's education report of the Madras government with reference to outcastes who have not become Christians: 'There was again not a single pupil in a college. There are colleges where professors with BA and MA after their names, by descent pure outcastes, have Brahmin pupils sitting at their feet to receive instructions. Only those who know what India was two generations ago can fully realize what a miracle that is.'*

Besides the British Government, many voluntary agencies and great personalities have done service to these communities by establishing educational institutions.

In Madras City, Henry Steel Olcott, the founder of Theosophical Society, was the first individual great personality who rendered service to the Depressed Classes, to feel of their manhood. He himself speaks why he entered in the field of education and adds

> Education is the evident panacea for all this social disorder. Teach the Paraiah that he is a man with human rights like any other man; that he must win them himself by raising himself; show him how to go to work, and then leave results to him and to time. That is the way the Pariah problem forced itself on my attention, and what I have done has been along those lines. I had no interested object of converting them to any religion no money to pay their debts, no business opening to offer them, no wish for their help or even gratitude, no self-seeking motive of any sort. There were all about me a great multitude of downtrodden, wretched human beings crying out for help, and I just set to give it them in the only form in which I believed it would do them permanent good.†

Mr C. Kofel, the then superintendent of Olcott Panchama Free School penned the details of the establishment of the Schools. 'In June 1894 the first of the five "Olcott Panchama Free Schools" was opened near the Theosophical Headquarters, Adayar, for the benefit of the children of the poor outcaste in that neighbourhood.'‡ In 1898, there was enough money on hand to enable the Managers to buy a fairly well built old dwelling house of five rooms, kitchen, etc., with a good sized compound in Kodambakkam, a village more than six miles from the Theosophical Headquarters. The place was chosen because at that time there were two large tanneries in the vicinity employing number of Panchamas who had come from other villages. It was chiefly for the children of these workers that the H.P.B. Memorial School, so called by Col. Olcott in memory

* Rev. G.E. Phillips, 1912, *The Outcaste Hope*, p. 85.
† C. Kofel, 1911, *The Olcott Panchama Free School*, p. 1.
‡ Ibid.

of his deceased friend and colleague, was started.' 'The third school, named Damodar, after K. Mavalankar Damodar, was opened on the 2nd October 1899, in small dwelling house in Teynampet, nearly four miles from Adyar.'†

> The Managers felt themselves justified in opening a fourth school, this time in Mylapore, about two miles from the Theosophical Headquarters, in a different direction from the others. A good-sized piece of land was purchased, on which nice little brick building with tiled roof was erected. This was completed in September 1901 and immediately there begun the work of uplifting the neglected Panchama children of that district. This school was called the 'Thiruvalluvar School' after the divine Pariah, as he has been styled.‡

'On the suggestion of one of the School Inspectors and of the President of the Corporation of Madras the fifth school was opened in May 1906, among the scavengers or "Toties" in Krishnaimpet nearly three miles from Adyar, in different direction again from the other four. This is the Annie Besant School.'§

The Hindu society baffled due to the mass conversion and the development in the political arena. The educated Hindus realized the mistake in having allowed the amelioration work among the Dalits to aliens. They started many organizations to help the Dalits in the beginning of the twentieth century.

A.C. Paranjape brought out the work done among the Dalits by the great personalities in Maharashtra as follows:

> In the early British period some individuals like Lokahitwadi and Vishnubuwas Bramachari in Maharashtra started expressing sympathies for the 'untouchables'. It was Mahatma Phule who first went beyond verbal sympathies. He not only exploded the myth of Brahmin superiority but took attempts at elevating the position of 'untouchables' by opening a school for them. He flung his private water-tank open for their use in 1868.¶

'Shahu Chhatrapati of Kolahapur passed a Mahar Vatan Abolition Act in his state in 1918. The Mahars thereby became outright owners of their land and were freed from the slavery of doing a hundred odd jobs for the village in return for small piece of land they were allowed to

* Kofel, *The Olcott Panchama*, p. 1.
† Ibid., p. 3.
‡ Ibid.
§ Ibid., p. 5
¶ A.C. Paranjpe, *Caste, Prejudice and the Individual* (Bombay: Lalvani Publishing House, 1970), p. 30.

cultivate. He recruited 'untouchables' as clerks in the state service and admitted a few educated 'untouchables' to the bar. In 1919, he legally prohibited the segregation of 'untouchable' children in schools.' 'Like Shahu Chhatrapati, Sayaji Maharaj Gaikwad—the ruler of Baroda—also supported the movement for the uplift of 'untouchables'. He employed Ambedkar, the leader of the 'untouchables' in his state, and also financed his education abroad.'*

There is one more important figure in Maharashtra whose name is associated with the movement which attempted to uplift 'untouchables'. S.M. Mate from Poona started a society in 1917 for eradication of untouchability and also started several schools for 'untouchables'. He taught 'untouchables' cleanliness. He associated and mixed with the 'untouchables', so freely that the orthodox Brahmins derogatorily called him Mahar Mate.†

A.C. Paranjape has raised a point as what made the Gandhiji to undertake the Harijan uplift work? 'Immediately after the "Poona Pact", Gandhi set out to intensify his efforts for the improvement of 'untouchables'. He started the All-India Anti-Untouchability League in September 1932. Later, Gandhi renamed the League as "Harijan Sevak Sangh" and popularized the name Harijan (men of god Hari) to designate the 'untouchable' castes.'‡

In south India no organized work was undertaken by the caste Hindus, who blew their own trumphet as if they were responsible for the present day advancement of Dalits. Whereas in other part of Indian at least some great souls have started work to ameliorate the condition of Dalits.

Mr N. Ranganathan speak out in 1911, as that 'Prarthana Samaj of Bombay under the presidency of Sir Narayan G. Chandravarkar established four schools in Bombay, important among them was Parel Middle School.'§

The Depressed Classes Mission of Bombay opened a boarding school for the poor depressed class scholars coming from outside Bombay city. Regularly started only in 1909 and there were twenty one boarders at the close of 1910. 'Poona branch of the mission established three schools in Poona city.'

* Paranjpe, *Caste, Prejudice and the Individual*, p. 31.
† Ibid., p. 30.
‡ Ibid., p. 33.
§ G.A. Natesan, 1977 (1912), *The Depressed Classes of India*, p. 174.

'In the Capital city of Madras itself the Association which was started in January 1909 as a result of the labour of Mr Shinde of Bombay, maintained two day schools—one at Vyasarpady with 55 pupils under two qualified teachers and another at Perambur with 25 scholars—as also two night schools with 50 adults attending then.' 'In Mangalore, the mission maintains the following institutions: (1) a day school, (2) a boarding house, (3) an industrial institute, (4) a colony of Panchama families.'*

For striking comparison it is better to see the position of the Hindus in the field of education.

In October 1911, Mr A. Vasudeva Pillai spoke about the position of the Hindus in all-India level as follows:

The state of education in the modern ways among the higher classes themselves must for long, have been very low, as the percentage of literacy to the total population even in the beginning of the twentieth century (1901), was only slightly about 6 per cent, and it is an index to the fact about how little the higher classes cared to educate themselves.†

In 1902, the Hindu Educational Mission of Madras made an appeal to the Hindu members to contribute their might for the noble cause of educating their children in the ideal way. They described about the Hindu institutions, there are many

pial (a seat of mortar work or earth against the walls of a house for sleeping) schools all over, especially in Madras, say on an average four to each street. But that these pial schools are neither well-formed nor well-conducted, needs no saying; and consequently many parents have to send their children to the Mission schools which are well-conducted and invariably equipped with things quite in taste of children, knowing fully well that the children are taught on Christian views and ideals, which, by drawing figures of false contrast from our ancient works, prejudice the young minds from their infancy.‡

Self-help

The Dalits who economically improved themselves by doing contractor work especially in Kolar Gold fields, in Railway Companies all over India, contributed their might in establishing schools. Some Dalits

* Natesan, *The Depressed Classes of India*, pp. 176, 177.
† Ibid., p. 154.
‡ P.S.R., 1902, *An Appeal to Hindu Educational Mission*, p. 1.

who raised their position in the economic ladder by associating with the business organizations of the English men had also extended their generosity in establishing schools from their own funds for the spread of education among the Depressed Classes.

Maharashtra

Rao Bahadur Mahajani brought out the following instance occurred event before 1911:

> One Junu a Mahara of Paras—a village near Akola, on the G.I.R., working as a Mukkundan (head of a gang) and then becoming a contractor, he raised himself to such a position that he was deemed worthy of being nominated on the Municipal Board at Akola, and he took his seat with high class Hindus who welcomed him there. The free boarding and lodging house he founded for poor Mahar boys attending Municipal and Government schools is still maintained by his widow.*

Calcutta

In 1911, Mr N. Ranganathan spoke out about Namasudras as:

> In face there found among them a few graduates and undergraduates of the university, following in many cases the profession of pleaders and physicians. Some among these educated Namasudras are labouring for the elevation of their own community. They have a weekly organ of their own named, Namasudra and a monthly Magazine, *Namasudra Suhrid*; they maintain a boarding house at Calcutta for the Namasudra scholars who come over there from the mofussil.†

The South

Mr John Rathinam of Madras between 1886 and 1889 established one middle school, three elementary schools, and one students' hostel in Madras city.

In 1906, Mr Chellappa Maistry who hailed from Gudiyattam Taluk in North Arcot district, became a contractor in Kolar Gold fields established an Anglo Vernacular School at Marikuppam.

In the same year Mr M.Y. Murugesan who hailed from Alandur, St Thomas Mount in Chinglepet District became a contractor in the

* G.A. Natesan, *Depressed Classes*, pp. 110, 111.
† Ibid., p. 173.

mines. He established two schools: one at Marikuppam and another at Champion Reefs.

* * *

In 1907, Dalits of Madras Presidency who migrated to Bangalore established one school and a library at 231, Poor House Road, Bangalore Cantonment.

In 1910, Swamy Sahajananda established a school in Chidambaram, South Arcot district under the name of Saint Nandanar School. Later it grew into a High school.

In 1920, Mr P.V. Subramanyam established a school in Chintadripet in Madras City under the name Venkatachalam Poor School.

In 1921, Rao Bahadur M.C. Rajah and Mr M. Palaniswamy established students' hostel in Royapettah. Later its name was changed as Padison hostel. Now it is standing as a monument with the name, 'M.C. Raja Hostel' Anna Salai (Mount Road) in Saidapet. It is being run by the government.

In 1921, Mr L.C. Guruswamy established two night schools in Madras City and one primary school at Ponneri.

In 1932, the Education Society of North Arcot District under the presidentship of Mr Thumbuswamy, a mining contractor in Kolar Gold fields, established a free hostel for boys at Ford Round Road, Vellore, North Arcot District under the name Venkatraman Hostel who was then the collector of North Arcot District. Later its name was changed as Rama Doss Hostel, a Dalit philanthropist. Now it is under the control of the government, and is run for girls.

The work of Dr B.R. Ambedkar is not brought out as obviously everyone knows it.

In the beginning of the era of social mobility among the depressed classes, what they required was according to Col. H.S. Olcott 'What they most need is education; not that of the university, but just enough to really help them to help themselves.'*

* Col. H.S. Olcott, 1902, *The Poor Pariah*, p. 32.

SPEECHES

Reform Educational Policy*

Swami Sahajananda

The policy of the government regarding education was not right. Suggestions had already been made and efforts undertaken to spread primary education, to start compulsory education and night schools to educate older people. Associations had also been started in *jillas* [districts] and the people were given responsibility. But right now, even primary education is in danger. They passed an order that schools with just one teacher should be closed. With that order they stopped all aid to schools run by individuals. Even if there is a shortage of money, no hand should be laid on the Department of Education. Also, the government has worked for the education of the Depressed Classes in a planned way. They ordered that all schools should admit the Depressed Classes, but that did not come into force. Because the parents did not like it, because the minds of the teachers did not change, because the owners of the buildings where the schools were situated did not want it, because the inspectors who oversaw the schools were people with no compassion for the Depressed Classes, because the taluk officers, the members of the city governance committee, the Labour officers did not look at these with diligence, the government order is absolutely useless. Ministry officials have not yet taken the right efforts for this order to be run as per the law. Many places determinedly refuse to admit Adi Dravidas. If the children go to the school of caste Hindus, they get beaten. They trouble the parents of these children in many ways. They trouble the teachers. They made a separate Labour Commissioners' Force for them. Now, using some excuse, they are removing even the Labour Force schools.

* Original title *Kalvik Kolkaiyai Mattruka.*

Yesterday, in reply to a home member's question, they said that 500 schools have been closed till now. Therefore, in the situation today, even grant schools have disappeared. Night schools have also disappeared. Experience shows that the schools of caste Hindus also do not admit them, though they say that they are admitting them. Nothing has happened for the Adi Dravidas. They are closing the Labour schools also. Therefore, disaster has struck the education of the Depressed Classes. I request the Honourable Minister of Education to tell us what plans the government people have thought of to spread education among the poor Depressed Classes. I ask him to explain what efforts they are taking to replace the schools that they are closing now in order to educate the future generations.

Generally, only lower grade schools and schools conducted by a teacher on a *pyol* are there in villages. Those who studied there study in the Sessions School for one year before undergoing teachers' training. But now, the government has closed the Sessions Schools in Cuddalore as well as in other jillas. Because of this, the number of those trained as basic teachers has reduced. The government has closed even the schools providing basic teacher training to the lower stratum in many places. They explain that by saying that they are going to create basic higher secondary examination schools. If that is so, what provisions have the government made in villages for basic higher secondary education to be imparted? How many basic higher secondary schools did they establish in every jilla last year in order to start higher elementary schools in villages? I request the Honourable Minister of Education to reply as to how many they are going to start this year. To run schools with higher grades, aren't teachers with at least secondary grade teacher training necessary? What efforts are the government people going to take for higher elementary schools and teachers with average teacher training to appear in every village? I am requesting you. Please let us know. In south Arcot jilla, Chidambaram is the abode of learning. There is a university there. Tamil College, Sanskrit College, Sri Meenakshi College, Music College, all are there. There are two high schools called the Ramasamy Chettiar Town High School and the Pachiappa's High School. A higher elementary school for the Depressed Classes and a Christian mission higher elementary school are also there. The government people refused to give a grant to the middle teacher training school in Chidambaram. The Honourable Raja Sir Annamalai Chettiar gave some Rs 30 lakh of his own money to start a university. The Town High School that was started by his elder brother is now being run by the Honourable

Kumaraja of Chettinad. The secondary, higher, and lower teacher training schools that are attached to it are being run in a very thrifty and efficient way. For the higher and lower teacher training schools to be run, the Honourable Raja of Chettinad is spending more than half the money. He is also looking for places to build teacher training colleges. There are only very few big men in Tamil Nadu who give freely to education. If the government people close the middle teacher training school in Chidambaram, the Honourable Raja has also decided to close the higher and lower basic teacher training schools. I will tell you something about all this to show that government people should not do such things.

By order R.C. No.2831/23, the government maintained that the secondary training section should soon be attached to a high school. The news on 22 January 1924—when all the DEOs were asked if the secondary training section could be attached to a well-run high school, the DEO of South Arcot asked the three high schools in the jilla as well as the eleven educational bodies there. Many high schools did not agree. Only the R.C.T. High School in Chidambaram came forward to agree. Because of this, the temporary secondary section that was being run by the Government in Vizhupuram, was moved to Chidambaram. While it was in Vizhupuram, the yearly expense of the two classes in the secondary section (apart from the children's stipend), was about Rs 9,300. According to G.O. no. 767, 12 May 1925, the expense of the Chidambaram training school in the year 1925–6 (apart from the stipend) was Rs 2,950. That is, when the government people moved the Vizhupuram secondary section to Chidambaram, the expenditure was reduced by two-thirds. From this, thinking that it was profitable to attach the two classes of the government lower elementary training to this secondary section, they attached that too to this school. Then they debated in government if it would be profitable to close all the training schools in this jilla and, run it as the new training school after creating many sections in each class. If that was done, the expense of running practicing sections wherever training schools were would be avoided. Keeping all the classes in the good R.C.T. High School of this town including the first class as the practicing section, all grades of classes in this jilla can be held in one place. After thinking deeply, the government people ordered the secondary training section in Chidambaram to be run at full cost and the elementary training section at half cost (lower–higher). Even then the management people asked for the full expenses for the elementary grades. Then, in the belief that in the course of time,

when the government people came to see the proficiency of the school, they would give more and more grants to the school, and that they would bear the full expenditure of the elementary grades also, they agreed to run the secondary section with full cost and the elementary section with half cost. The profit that the Government accrued from this:

The annual expenditure for the two classes in the Chidambaram government lower elementary grade (61 boys) is Rs 10,500.

The annual expenditure for the Vizhupuram secondary, higher, and lower grades (128 boys, six classes), Rs 34,000. That is, the annual expenditure of the above mentioned two training schools comprising eight classes is Rs 44,500.

If the annual expenditure of the Sri Meenakshi Training School of Chidambaram comprising three grades (five classes) is looked into, it shows that the Government made a profit of Rs 16,000 in the first year itself. If the Government is shown a profit like this year after year, the management people believed that the government people themselves will pay the full expense of the elementary grade also. The maximum annual expenditure for this (Sri Meenakshi Training) school (200 boys) including stipends of about Rs 2,500 is Rs 32,000. For approximately the same 200 boys in the government training schools in Nellore, Dindugal, and Thirunelvelli, the expenditure is Rs 36,000–40,000; Rs 27,000–40,000; Rs 32,000–39,000, respectively. If Sri Meenakshi Training School is compared to these, the annual expenditure is lower by Rs 4,500 on an average. The inspection report attached to this shows that the school is being well run.

Also, from the number of boys who come to study in this school without a stipend, it is clear that this school has become famous. The growth and fame of this school is also evident from the fact that the boys who get a stipend from the taluka board and the jilla board are sent to this school. Moreover, this school is very useful to develop primary education, to strengthen the education of the lower classes, and to destroy illiteracy. For example, the number of the Adi Dravida students who are trained in this school for some previous years are as follows:

	1925–26	1926–27	1927–28	1928–29	1929–30	1930–31	1931–32
Chidambaram	16	19	16	14	18	37	48
Cuddalore	7	14	19	13	13	–	–
Vizhupuram	8	13	16	17	12	–	–
Dindivanam	Nil	1	3	3	1	–	–

Apart from being run in a very thrifty way, this management school is also being run very efficiently. The management people have been able to provide amenities like plenty of space, supportive teachers, good hostel, and a huge playground.

The government people have ordered the secondary grade to be removed from such a well-run school only because they have to bear its full cost. When the most important section went, the management people decided that the other two sections were also not necessary. The first year students in the secondary grade here have to go to Thanjavur, Saidapet, or Chithoor. Because there are 350 students in Thanjavur it is full. In Saidapet, L.T. training is the one given most importance. Chithoor gives importance only to Andhra people. In the four jillas of South Arcot, North Arcot, Salem, and Chinglepet, it is this school that is most important.

The expenditure of the management people for this school is as follows:

	Rs	Anna	Pice
1925–26	7,677	9	0
1926–27	8,062	6	11
1927–28	4,761	3	3
1928–29	5,202	1	5
1929–30	2,269	7	4
1930–31	4,277	14	6
Total	32,258	40	29

The above amount that the management people have shown is what they have spent on their own and they are running it in a way that is profitable to the Government and extremely beneficial to the students. Importantly, they are running it to benefit the Depressed Classes also. If the middle teacher training school in Chidambaram is removed, there are no other schools in the jilla. In Thirunelvelli there is a government middle teacher traning school. Similarly, a school is being run by the missionaries in Palayamkottai. In Madurai jilla and Dindugal, a school is being run by the government people. In Pasumalai in the same jilla, one is being run by the missionaries. In South Arcot, apart from Chidambaram, they are in no other place. Chidambaram which has a university, is conducive to study. It is a holy place that can cultivate virtues. Therefore, the teacher training school in Chidambaram should not be closed.

Generally, the help given to those who study for teaching jobs is meagre. As of now they are giving ten to twelve rupees. Those who study for the teacher job are mostly married people with families. These people studied, regardless of the fact that they found it difficult to pay the rent and provide adequate food with this meagre sum. Now, because they have reduced a big portion of that meagre sum, it is impossible to describe the troubles they have to undergo. Government people should not reduce the number of students of the teacher training schools either. If that is not possible, I am asking for a slightly generous outlook to be shown to the Depressed Classes.

A middle school for girls should be started in Chidambaram. Now, since there is a university in Chidambaram, there is no need to say that a girls' school is necessary there. Since there is no separate middle school for girls, they have to study in the Pachiappa's High School, Town High School, colleges, and so on along with boys. There is a girls' hostel there for Adi Dravidas. It is necessary for them to have a separate girls school. At present, a higher elementary school is being run in Mela Veedhi in Chidambaram, by the government people themselves under the supervision of the Municipal Council. Two hundred and thirty girl students are studying there. There are also seven municipal girls' schools in the town of Chidambaram. But there is no separate high school for the students of these seven schools and for the students of schools run by individuals to study. As mentioned before, there are ten women as teachers in the government girls' school. Nobody is of a high quality. If those with secondary training are taken as teachers in that school and they are given proper attention, then the above mentioned school itself can become a secondary school. I request the government people to make an effort in this matter.

I am asking for gurukula schools to be established in every jilla for the Depressed Classes. In Chidambaram, the Nandanar Higher Elementary School is being run by Nandanar Education Society to which the Depressed Classes belong. Three hundred and fifty children study there. The members of the Society are running a hostel there with fifty girls and 150 boys. I am requesting the government people to, therefore, help in making it a residential high school.

The schools run by the jilla labour officers should not be closed. In villages, if there is a taluk board school or an aided school, they are closing the labour schools there. The Depressed Classes are not admitted in the board schools. It was not possible to get students from the Depressed Classes admitted in the taluka board school in Thirumushnam. The

slum boys who live in the fertile lands of Chidambaram could not be admitted in the board school there. Because caste Hindus are the heads of board schools, because heads are people who have to listen to members, because the members have to act according to the wish of the voters back home, it is not possible to get into a board school and study against the wishes of the voters who are caste Hindus. Aided schools are mostly not well run. Therefore, if in the places where the labour schools run by the government, the board school and the aided school are placed, and students made to study in the labour school, then the school also will be well run and there will not be difficulty for anyone. I request the Honourable Minister of Education to take note and issue an order quickly for labour schools not to be closed.

If there is a great shortage of money, I request that the Law College be kept closed for ten years. Right now, many people who have studied law are suffering from a lack of jobs. Practice also does not bring money. Therefore, if the Law College is closed, it will not only be a great protection to those who have studied till now, but the money that is saved from that can be used for basic education.

Government people are giving enormous sums of money to the jilla board, taluk board, municipal association, and the panchayat board for the sake of education. In holy places, enough schools for the Depressed Classes have not been established. For example, in Chidamabaram taluk, there may be more or less 80 schools belonging to the board. Of these they have kept four schools for the Depressed Class. If a certain amount of money is set aside to be spent for the Depressed Class, they will get the chance to get educated. I request the Honourable Minister of Education to look into this.

The inspector at the Chidambaram taluka of Kaattumannaarkoil, has brought about caste differentiation in the Teachers' Association. He helped beat a teacher in Lalpettai. He is closing labour schools. I request some attention to be paid to this matter.

(Speech of 18 March 1932, Vol. LXI, pp. 517–23)

—Translated by Meera Rajagopalan

Woman's Advancement is Man's Freedom*

Meenambal Sivaraj

I express my sincere thanks to the people of the Conference's Reception Committee for asking me to preside over the Thirunelvelli Adi Dravidar Conference. For a society or a nation to become independent three things have to be given utmost importance: education, unity, and advancement of women. Compared to other nations, education in our nation is really backward. But in our nation, there is no unity amongst us due to social differences in the name of caste.

In no other nation are the women treated so badly as ours. It is because women are in a backward position that our nation also is so backward. Only those nations whose women have progressed alone will advance. Therefore, if at all we want progress, we have to work single-mindedly for the advancement of women.

Education

'The learned are said to have eyes,
The unlearned have but two sores'

said our great poet Thiruvalluvar Nayanar. It means: even if there are two eyes in the face, they are eyes only for the educated, and for the uneducated they are only sores. This shows that education is important for both men and women. Many amongst us say that education is not important for women, and ask: 'Why educate a woman who is after all going to just cook?'

Education is of paramount importance to women because everything in the house has to be taken care of by women, because children are placed in the care of their mothers, and because, all responsibilities in life are mostly taken care of by women.

Compared to other nations, ours is backward in education. Also our community, because of the long indifference of the higher castes, is even more backward in education and all other aspects.

When even men of our community lag behind in education, why talk particularly of women? But now, due to the benevolent government, we have been given several provisions to attain progress in education.

* Original title *Penkalin Munnetrame Aankalin Viduthalai.*

Now, I request you all, the members of our community, not to let this opportunity slip through our hands; instead try to advance in education like members of other communities.

Unity

It is said that, 'A family without unity will be ruined.' Unity is important not just for a family but for society at large and for a nation to progress. Today, our nation is in such a bad state due to caste divisions. It will take many years for these caste divisions to be completely destroyed in our country. For the people of our community to advance, to progress like other communities, to prevent them from being treated worse than animals by others, and to assert that we are also citizens, and that we also have the rights like others do, everybody must unite.

'Self-help is the best help.' So all of us must unite and struggle to attain the necessary advancement of our community. We must form organizations that could instruct us on how to unite, how to make our community progress, and how to protest and get what we need. There are immeasurable social gains to be made if we can stand as one, unite, and face the struggle without any internal divisions.

Welfare Associations

We stand to gain a great deal by establishing associations:

1. We can meet others, mix with one another, and be united.
2. We can submit petitions and gain admission into the school of our choice, access public wells and other amenities through these associations.
3. The associations will help establish night schools in nearby villages and give an opportunity for all, including the old people and young who have to work during the day, to learn and progress.
4. We can submit petitions to the benevolent government about the atrocities inflicted on our community by others and can get all our basic amenities through these associations.

Cooperative Societies

Cooperative societies have now been established everywhere, in many locations. These cooperative societies are established by the Government to prevent poor farmers from pledging their land to rich people at an

exorbitant interest; instead get loans at a fixed and fair rates of interest. Leaders of the Depressed Classes in Chennai quite often receive complaints from farmers of our caste, who own lands and pay tax like the upper caste Hindus, that when they seek loans from the cooperative societies pledging their land, they are asked to not only pledge their land to high caste Hindus and pay ten times interest but are eventually denied those loans.

Since these cooperative societies are maintained by upper caste Hindus, they treat all our petitions as trifling and throw them away. Therefore, it is important that we unite and establish separate societies for ourselves, take steps to independently urge the government to offer us all the necessary support and prevent our people from losing heavily and unfairly. Therefore, these separate cooperative societies are vital.

Woman's Progress

'Woman's progress is the nation's progress,' said a wise man. Every man should realize how important it is to educate women. A woman, in this world, serves a man as a mother, a sister, and a wife. Women share the joys and sorrows of men. If a woman is educated, besides assisting her children in their studies, she can protect them from getting addicted to bad habits and help in the smooth running of the family, stand by their husband folk helping them in their political and social progress, and consoling them to the best of their ability when the men get hurt due to many unexpected circumstances. An educated woman can make men happy, bear brave and clever children, thereby bringing honour and fame to the nation. Since our land is referred to as the motherland, the language we speak is called the mother tongue, the goddess of learning is Saraswathi, the goddess of wealth is Lakshmi—because women have always been referred to as special—I humbly request you to see that our women are not treated as mere animals, and realize that since the women's progress alone is our men's salvation, we must work wholeheartedly for the upliftment of women and give them the necessary education by keeping the nation's progress in mind. This is my most humble request.

The Measures Adopted by the Justice Party

It was only after the Justice Party was formed that the issues regarding the 'untouchables' and the downtrodden could become a political problem.

The political programme of the Justice Party had included untouchablity even at the formation of the party. It was only after seeing this that, in 1920, the Congressmen planned to woo the 'Untouchables' to join the Congress by saying that the removal of untouchability was prerequisite to our demand for freedom. It was only after the Justice Party brought about welfare measures in the fields of education, health, benefits in housing and employment, introduced political representation, enacted laws condemning the practice of untouchability in public domain including streets, *chavadi*, and schools that the Congressmen formed the 'Harijan Seva Sangh', collected lakhs of funds and helped the upper castes to benefit from it.

Above all, in the Round Table Conference, Gandhi argued that it was only after independence that untouchability could be abolished—till then there should be no talk on the formation of an assembly for 'untouchables' through a separate electorate and other representations, and argued against our leader Ambedkar, who represented the 'untouchables' at the Round Table Conference.

Overruling the objections of the Congress, the government gave us 18 constituencies. That too was nullified by the Poona Pact. But for the Poona Pact, many deserving people and supporters of the progress of our community would have been elected as the representatives of the Adi Dravidas in today's elections. But, the Poona Pact has made it possible for those among our people who know nothing, ignorant about what should be done for the society, and those who are slaves to the upper castes, to come to power.

It was made clear in the Poona Pact that the Congressmen should not interfere in the matter relating to the depressed sections. Despite the importance given to it in the pact, and despite the insistence made in it that Mr Gandhi should not interfere in this matter, Congressmen stepped into it, had Gandhi's report changed, and those who claimed that they got the pact signed 'only to save Gandhi'—give troubles to Ambedkar by contesting against us. Therefore, it is very clear what good Congressmen have done for the depressed and what good the Justice Party has done.

Brothers and Sisters

I conclude this speech with my heartfelt thanks to all of you for not only listening patiently to these things I have spoken about, exhorting you to think about ways to uplift our society, but also to acknowledge

once again the reception committee that invited me to preside over this conference.

(Speech delivered at the Adi Dravida Conference on 31 January 1937)

—Translated by Meera Rajagopalan

Land Rights*

Thol. Thirumavalavan

The 'Land Rights Conference' has been announced focusing an extremely important demand. What is the ideology behind this conference call? It begins with the basic demand, 'Home for all! Land for all!'

Even now in our villages we see three, or four, or five families living together in the same hut. A majority of them forced to live in such difficult circumstances are *cheri* Tamils belonging to the marginalized sections of society. Even sparrows have their own nests. Even crabs have their own crevices. Every being ensures its place of residence in order to exist on this earth. But even today, there are lakhs of cheri Tamils who live in this nation without a *manai-patta* (residential ownership document). What a disgrace!

Such a shameful thing like people petitioning for a manai-patta in their own land does not occur anywhere else in the world. The sons of the soil submit memorandums seeking manai-patta. They build their huts on *natham poramboke* (residential area for house-sites in a village), *eri* poramboke (lakeside marshlands), *tharisu* poramboke (wasteland). But even that hut does not become their own.

We have finished celebrating the golden jubilee of this nation's freedom. But the situation I've described continues to prevail all over India. Crores of Dalits continue to suffer without a document of ownership for their homes. More than ten lakh Dalit families live on the pavements in Chennai. They live on the platform, they don't have a home. One of the basic needs is shelter, a home.

Not just the Dalits, everyone needs a home. If there are homeless people from any section of society, it is a stigma on this nation. Hence, our demand that everyone should have their own home! Just a dwelling place is not sufficient, people need land to plough.

* Original title *Mannurimai*.

Today, the Tamil Nadu government has given an assurance through its governor's address that within the next six months (January to June), it has resolved to provide pattas to those who don't have any kind of ownership document for the land on which they reside. People living on poramboke land will be given pattas. But when there are four families living in the same hut, the patta will be given in the name of only one individual, it will not be given to the others.

For instance, I have a hut, it is in my father's name. But, we are three brothers. If that hut receives a patta, it will be in my younger brother's name. What about the other three families? If I get married tomorrow and want to live in my own village, which is my house in Anganur? And which will be the homes of my brothers? The land is only half a cent. Even that is not two and a half, or three cents. If an ordinary man plans to build a hut, a three cent of land is a basic necessity. If the home has to have a garden, at least a minimum of five cents of land must be given. Five and a half cent of land is called a manai, or 2,400 square feet. This 2,400 square feet is necessary if a husband and wife have to live together with their children.

Go and look at the places where the Dalit people live today. It is not a shame that has come upon the Dalits, it is a shame that has come upon this nation! When the proletariat itself doesn't have a place to reside in this land, it is a disgrace to the nation.

That is why the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Party has led the struggle for land rights by holding seminars, rallies, demonstrations since 1993. Give five cents of residential land to everyone! Give five acres of agricultural land to everyone! Retrieve Panchami lands!* Give rights and reservation in taking government lands on lease! There is reservation in education and employment opportunities, but there is no reservation in areas of economic emancipation. All over Tamil Nadu, there are 5,50,000 acres of land owned by the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments (HR&CE) Department. This fact was mentioned by former minister Thamizhkudimagan in an interview. The land under the control of the HR&CE Department alone is five-and-a-half-lakh acres. This is separate from the land owned by the forest department and the highways department. In that interview he further mentioned that only 1,00,000 acres of land was leased through auctions, the remaining 4,50,000 acres

* Lands donated to the 'untouchables' by the British government following the report submitted by the collector in 1891, in the 'Note on the Pariahs of Chingleput'. These lands were later grabbed by the caste Hindus. The panchami land retrieval movement fights for rights of Dalits over these lands.

were encroached upon. Who has encroached this 4,50,000 acres of land? Is there any Dalit among these encroachers? Is it even possible? Will this government, police, tahsildar, or people of other communities, let a Dalit encroach even a single cent of land? Even if a Dalit opens a petty shop, they will be planning how fast they can demolish it. A Dalit cannot even do business from a vending push-cart. They will wonder who owns the push-cart and if he is a Dalit, they will clear him out. Our workers who drive rickshaws cannot park it nor sleep in it. They suffer extreme hardship at the hands of the police. Marwaris who encroach large tracts of land and build skyscrapers can live happily; the policeman will salute the Marwari, and silently collect his bribe. But the shameful situation is that this toiling son of the soil is not allowed to nap even in a cramped position in his rickshaw. Go to Kothavalchavadi, Valayaperumal Street, or Kshatriyan Street. After all the shops have downed their shutters, the pavement is home for several people. The working people here pile their clothes, food-items, and broken utensils on the platform after the shops close. When the shop is opened, they will store this somewhere, without the space to even lie down. Thousands of such families are pavement-dwellers even today, sleeping on roadside platforms. What a deplorable life! Who is to be ashamed if there are families in this land who have been reduced to the level of carrying on their conjugal relations by the roadside? Not the oppressed people, not the proletariat. It is a disgrace to this nation.

Therefore, land is primary among the basic needs. Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Party has continuously stressed the importance of this demand since 1993. We have held agitations for land rights. We have also demanded five cents of residential land for everyone, five acres of agricultural land, Panchami land and reservation in auctions related to lease of government-owned properties. By government-owned properties, I mean the right to take on lease the land that is owned and auctioned by the HR&CE Department. Just as there is reservation in education and employment, we need reservation in contract works and tenders also. We are asking for a particular percentage to be reserved for Dalits for leasing out whatever might be auctioned, land or homes, or anything else.

Nine-and-a-half acres of land is being auctioned for lease in Chennagarampatti. Reserve two or three acres of land such that only a Dalit can bid for it and take it on a lease. This is reservation in lease/auctioning of government properties. How many *karuvela maram* (*Acacia arabica* trees) and sedges growing in lakes and ponds are leased?

Can Dalits bid for it? There are auction tenders for roadside tamarind trees. Can a Dalit take it on a lease? No, he cannot even pick a single tamarind seed. They lease out parking spaces in bus-stands on contract, but can a Dalit bid for a lease? When this is not possible, how will they be able to take wineshops on lease? A man who leases out a wineshop becomes a millionaire within a year. Are Dalits able to lease out the more lucrative enterprises like sand and stone quarries? How many Dalits are lease-holders in sand and stone quarries? How many Dalits have leased out the so-called 'black gold' marble quarries? We are unable to take land on lease. We are unable to take quarries on lease. We are unable to take wineshops on lease. We are unable to take tamarind trees on lease. We are unable to take land belonging to the HR&CE department on lease. If Dalit people don't participate in any of this, how can we improve financially? If there are a thousand shops on Purasaiwakkam, does a single shop belong to a Dalit? Why is he unable to set up shop, or run his business?

Because of the absolute and total marginalization in the economic arena, even a Dalit who toils 24 hours a day is unable to attain any progress. To develop economically, reservations in education and employment are insufficient. We need reservations in contracts, auctions and tenders. Only then a Dalit can become a trader, a businessman, a contractor, an entrepreneur. Unless he takes part in this, he cannot develop economically. When an IAS officer retires, at the very most he would own a house. What else can he earn? Especially if a Dalit becomes an IAS officer, there will be a group to monitor his activities. There will be someone to file a complaint against him, and will keep writing complaints to somehow remove him from the job. The Dalit IAS officers will be given useless postings.

So, one cannot improve economically by getting an education or an employment. Education has only produced self-centred persons and not rich people. The Dalit man who gets educated is self-centred and aloof, bothered only about himself, his wife and his children. He does not have a charitable mind to work for his people. What a curse!

Who are the ones who fight in the arena set up by the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal? Who are the ones who have revealed and recognized the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal as a political force today? Those who lacked the opportunity to get an education; those who are unable to get employment; those who have no source of income; labourers, herdsmen, porters, and ordinary workers. The educated class, the white-collar class will come. They will come when the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal wins

twenty members of the legislative assembly (MLAs) and ten members of parliament (MPs). If we reach a stage where one can become a vice-chancellor, or get some other posting only by meeting Thirumavalavan, they will come to us at that time. I am not saying this to point out anybody's faults. I am not saying this in order to blame anybody.

Therefore, keeping all these demands in mind, we have announced that the Land Rights Conference will be held in Tirunelveli this 14 April, on Ambedkar's birthday. You should begin preparations from today. Every direction should sport the slogan of land rights: Homes for all! Land for all! The Tamil Nadu government has announced that it will provide two acres of land and is giving it away to several people. Nobody can deny the fact that it is a revolutionary scheme. Land grants will create a major change after five years.

It must be expanded and extended even further. We have decided to conduct that epoch-making conference, with the basic demand that people from Dalit communities should become beneficiaries.

(Speech delivered on 25 January 2007 at Purasaiwakkam to commemorate language-martyrs.)

—Translated by Meena Kandasamy

May the Intoxication of the Film World Clear*

K. Krishnaswamy

The seminar 'Film World: Look Back and See' was not organized either to get me publicity or to nurture the new Tamizhagam Party through reviewing the field of filmdom. On the contrary, I have organized this seminar, with the good intention—because of the affection I have for five-and-a-half-crore Tamilians—for this community to be in the position it is today, for it to advance by many more steps, to advance so much that it can be differentiated from other communities.

The reviews of the film *Sandiyar*, the discussions about it, the violent scenes in it—led to this seminar. I came to politics after spending a year in the MISA prison at the age of 19. Unlike other politicians, I was not

* Original title *Theliyattum Thiraiyulaka Pothai.*

one who came to politics as a member of the legislature or a member of the parliament. I am interested reviewing films only because of my firm belief that this community can be served in this way and not for any publicity.

Film director Cheran accepted two things. I laud him for that. He said, 'Vulgarity and violence should be completely eschewed. All of us are fighting from inside film industry itself. We are fighting all alone, rumbling all alone.' Therefore, we are here to lend a hand to those of you who are fighting alone and not to let you all down.

You people in the field of films have wrong ideas about religion, quotas, and other things. Those thoughts occur to you because you do not know the basis of a caste-based society. This society has been split for 2,000 years by way of religion. Religious exploitation is the main investment here. In America, if man has to exploit man, investment is needed—100 crores, 200 crores, 1,000 crores are needed. In Germany, Japan, Australia, also investment is needed. But in India alone, exploitation can take place without any investment. Exploitation can take place with just religion. It is just enough to say 'I am a Brahmin'. They do not need investment of any kind.

If a wage labourer goes without a spade he has to go back without any work. Those who trim branches also have to take a pruning instrument with them. But, do Brahmins ever carry a weapon or any instrument with them? The bell is there in the temple itself to be rung. This is such a nation. To say that there should be no quotas, no religion in this country, is an act without understanding our history. Inculcated even at birth as we and you, your tongue and my tongue, these are the marginalized people-people without choices cannot be educated. Cheated by everything on earth even at birth, the cruelty of being set apart is happening only here.

How is it that you do not know about the cruelty of more than 100 people being killed in the violence that took place in Mudhukullathoor in the year 1957? How is it that you are unaware of the fact that more than 2,000 families were made destitute? Without knowing the events that could take place in our country, without knowing their roots, how can you give people your message?

Sandiyar means someone who commit atrocities. One can live in Chennai without even knowing that name. But if you say Sandiyar in Thirunelvelli or Thoothukodi or Virudunagar or Ramnathapuram or Dindukal, you will soon see the reaction. On getting up in the morning, Sandiyar will come into the streets only after tucking a sickle into his

waist at the back. He will go to the shops, give a slap or two, take what he wants, eat and go away without paying. He will go to a house, rape, and go away. When called to account, he will kill. Did all this take place or not? Are they not still taking place now? This is what you refuse to accept.

In Pappaapatti, Keeripatti,* it has not been possible to hold a panchayat election. Where did the members of filmdom go? Your idea is that ten actors and ten producers should live as crorepatis. What does it matter if society goes to pot? My question to you members of the film world is: how do you continue living oblivious of the troubles that erupted in Tamil Nadu after *Thevar Magan*† was produced in the year 1992?

'Girl, sing in praise of the dust from the feet of the devar.' What happened after this song came? People living in Chennai do so without knowing the caste of the people who live next to them. But now, who is he? Whose street is this street? Whose colony is this colony? This is the colony of Pillaimars, this is the colony of Thevars, this is the colony of the Depressed Class. Isn't it splitting up into separate entities? How fair is it to make caste-based films now, when these people who have already borne the brunt of their cruelty are surging towards independence?

Though it has been fifty years since the Indian nation became independent, discrimination still exists. Are you aware of the discrimination (two tumbler system) that the Pallars, Paraiyas, and Chakkilis who live in the 56,000 villages are subject to? It is not my objective at all to stop Kamal Hassan's film *Sandiyar*. On the contrary, I am saying this because, if the film *Sandiyar* continues to run in the same name and if there are continuous trouble for some three, six months more, Kamal Hassan will be held responsible for those and the accused. None of you has understood this. We are capable of fighting for the rights of this community. Since I know what is going to happen tomorrow, I am standing against it.

How to make successful films? How to collect enormous amounts of money? For these reasons they are making Tamil films in the most irresponsible manner. They are making the Tamil youth degenerate. It is because I have made it my objective to stop it, that we have invited all

* Pappaapatti and Keeripatti are the reserved village panchayats, where elections could not be conducted as no Dalit candidate stood for election following murder threats from the dominant caste groups.

† A popular film with actors Sivaji Ganesan and Kamal Hassan in leading roles; it celebrates the virtues and valour of the Thevar caste in rural Tamil Nadu.

of you here. If you say there is a Censor Board, how did the film *Boys** get released? If it is said that *Sandiyar*'s name should not be changed; that the film should be screened under the same name, then why was the title of the film changed from *Geethai*† to *New Geethai*? You will accept if somebody else says so, but not when Krishnaswamy says something. If that is the case, doesn't it mean that there is something wrong with you?

I have no anger or disgust towards this actor or any other actor. No disgust or affection for any director. I will definitely appreciate something if it is correct. We will definitely not give permission for any outlook to be used in a wrong way. Is it possible to accept it if the milk of the film world's outlook is mixed with poison and given? Just as a percentage of pesticide being mixed with Pepsi and sold, we express our vigorous opposition to the harm being planted in society via the medium of films.

We cannot be silent about the great troubles that those of us who want to bring about good changes in society have undergone at the hands of the people in the film world. To explain why it is said that it is because of films that there has been no political awareness for the past fifty years, I wish to affirm that this is because of the societal harm that has come from films. The harm of building temples to heroes should not happen in this country. Who knows of those who fought for us, about Father Periyar who fought against caste, about our leader Ambedkar, about Marx? Even the will to learn such things is not there.

It is only because of an absolute irresponsibility that films like *Boys* are produced. I am asking, why should the celebrations for the release of the film *Sandiyar* have been held in Chennai only? What was the reason for that film to be first released in Madurai? The idea is that after urging one caste, we can run that film, isn't it? Using the influence of those who were ruling there, you have already produced and run one film. Similarly, this film also should be run, wasn't that the reason? If all those who can commit atrocities, those who can indulge in rowdism in this country are all made out to be heroes in this country, and are given good identification, then how can good people live in this society with dignity?

* A movie directed by Shankar that deals with the sexual encounters of schoolboys and their achievements in music.

† Name of a Tamil film, which alluded to Bhagavadgita, was changed following the campaigns launched by the Hindu organization in 2004 demanding change of the film's title citing that it would spoil the scriptural value of Bhagavadgita.

Even today go to the Periyar bus stop in Madurai and take a look—'Sandiyar durbar begins in Madurai', it says, on a huge wall. Sickles on both sides. Blood keeps dripping. Whose blood do you think that is? Let Sandiyar be anybody. But should the sickle be lifted by a Tamilian against another Tamilian? No shame at all; no compassion at all. Is there any conscience? If he is described as lifting the sickle, who is he slaughtering? Go from here and kill an American? Because one Tamilian here kills another Tamilian, he is seen as a brave man. A man who wields a weapon is a brave man; then is the one who doesn't wield a weapon a coward?

This is what I am asking, this is what I am condemning, this is what I am saying should be stopped. These words can be said with societal responsibility in mind. Tensions are brewing among youngsters there. There is no objection at all if you call yourself a superior man. The problem is only when you call someone a low man. Nobody has any objection at all if you call yourself a superior man. The problem comes only when you call somebody a low man, of being an inferior man. As it is, when mental conflicts are taking place about calling people superior and inferior, to take a sickle, claim I am the superior man, all of you should surrender to me; is this democracy?

If such films are capable of encouraging violence, I definitely will not consent to them. It is not necessary to take into account the opinion of that film. There is violence in its very name. I am one who has experienced it personally—the blood that is spilt is my own blood, how can the spilling of the blood of a Tamilian be permitted? If the hero of *Sandiyar* comes wielding a knife, if a Sandiyar appears in every town, how will the situation be? We could have kept quiet if Sandiyar had appeared fifty years ago. But now, if one Sandiyar appears, a hundreds will start to appear. Are you the only Sandiyar in the country? I am also a Sandiyar; so saying if everyone picks up a sickle then what will happen? If it is your idea to encourage this, Mr Kamal Haasan, you need not remove the name of *Sandiyar*, show it in yourself.

This is a social problem. The people who have been controlled, oppressed, put down by society for 2,000 years, are only now breathing slowly, enjoying the winds of their independence. When they are so enjoying, once more to oppress and contain them, they are giving weapons to those who oppress. It is those who oppose this, those who are engaged in the fight to oppose it, who are projected as brave people in cinema. But, those who oppress—there is no history whatsoever that they metamorphosed into brave people. Tell honestly, in how many

pictures in this country, are those who fight this oppression—our Dalit brothers—portrayed as heroes?

An agitation has been taking place for four years in Maancholai.* Did you have the conscience to even find out what the agitation was about? Eighteen people sacrificed their life while agitating in Thamarabharani. Didn't they all appear as heroes to you? They warned; don't compete for the leadership of the panchayat. If you do we will not allow you to sit in that chair. Disregarding even this, Melavalavu Murugesan competed and won. But before he could occupy that chair, he was killed mercilessly. Because those who support repression, those who commit atrocities, those who have committed crimes for a very long time, have lifted up the sickle—you call them brave men. In what way is this just?

Aren't those who probably watch films the most in this country the Dalit people who are living in the lower levels of society? Throughout the world, it is the history of us, the oppressed people, that is coming as stories, books, and films. But, only in Tamil Nadu, where being reactionary is firmly established, are those who oppress the people described as masters. I am publicizing this to filmdom only to redress this and not for anything else.

I have planned to hold a seminar like this, gathering people of all the districts of Tamil Nadu. All the thinkers, writers, friends from the film world should take part. Just like getting rid of untouchability is our objective, getting rid of poverty is our objective, establishing an even society without difference is our objective, so too it is our objective to save the Tamil film world from that intoxication into which it has fallen—and change and make give the mental ability to differentiate between good and bad.

(Speech delivered at the seminar 'Film World: Look Back and See', which took place in Chennai on 22 November 2003 under the auspices of 'Pudhiya Tamizhagam'. Film producers and enthusiasts took part in it. We have published parts of Dr Krishnasamy's valedictory address.)

—*Translated by Meera Rajagopalan*

* In the demonstration conducted for settling issues regarding wage by those working in the Mancholai Tea Estate, led by Pudiya Tamilagam Party (headed by Krishnasamy) and Tamil Maanila Congress (a faction of Tamil Nadu Congress Party), police unleashed violence to disperse the crowd that resulted in the dealth of 17 Dalits on 23 July 1999.

ARTICLES

Dalit Protest Culture
The First Stage[*]

Raj Gauthaman

Clearly, Dalits are in a situation where they have to organize their own liberation. For this purpose the liberation movement that they design will have two dimensions: First, cutting through nationality, race, and language, Dalit culture should identify itself with the cultural features among other people similarly discriminated at birth, due to the skin colour like the blacks, or due to their gender like women. Second, in India there are other people like them who cannot be considered of Indian nationality but are of a subservient position. These are the hill people and other tribes.

Dalits should join them and construct a distinct sub-national culture, different from the existing nationalism. The Dalit sub-national culture thus raised will have many issues in common with the black and feminist movements. Such a Dalit culture is bound to be a protest culture. With the rise of this culture of protest, Dalits can jettison the Brahmanical-Hindu casteist garbage they have accumulated over millennia. Then the importance hitherto denied to the working class can be redeemed. The hegemonic class, to further their own interests, has loaded the Dalits with certain ideological burdens. The protest culture should instil enough courage among the Dalits to discard this load as not their own. I agree that it is easier to talk and write about this than to do this. The Dalits, who are steeped in guilt, fear, despair, poverty, centuries of ignorance, slave mentality, and apprehension of change, will find it difficult to free themselves from this mindset. Only by ignoring, attacking, humiliating,

[*] Original title *Dalit Kalaka Panpaadu: Muthal Kattam.*

rejecting, and ridiculing this hegemonic culture, its symbols step by step, can the Dalits get rid of their mental blocks. Dalit protest culture contains all these, though superficially it may appear like a mere anarchist culture.

Brahmanical culture took the form of Hindu culture, a poisonous set of mores, with the sole aim of protecting the landowning interests of the hegemonic castes. To protect the landowning interests, the people were fitted into maze of socio-economic relationships through the caste framework. Government, caste, religion, god, code of conduct, ethics, justice, rules governing man–woman relationships, ideology of family, literature—all these were created so that the people in this structure of socio-economic relationship might believe that it has been constructed for their benefit. Though this construct appears to be a common to all Hindus, for the working class Dalits, it has a different face. Justice, ethics, code of conduct, god, dharma, literature, are supposed to be more with the Brahmins, and according to caste hierarchy gradually reduces as it reaches the Dalits. According to the laws of Manu, in Dalits, these things are reduced, degraded, and despicable. It can be seen clearly that as per the Hindu-Brahmin culture, Dalits are anarchists. But in fact the Dalits can be called rebels. The hegemonic group feared the 'untouchable' Dalits, wondering what form their protest would assume. Only when the Dalits transform themselves into protestors, as feared by the upper castes, can we say that the first stage of Dalit liberation has begun. The weapons of protest for the Dalits can be found in the very culture that oppresses them.

The Counter Culture

We already have an alternate cultural tradition among the marginalized who have been living at the edge of history and among the Dalits who are in fact partly tribal. This can provide the impetus needed to take the first step in setting up the Dalit protest culture. In fact even among the oppressed women, elements of this alternate culture can be seen. It can be discerned among all the marginalized people subjected to oppression. Richard Lannoy called this antipodal culture. This can also be termed the 'Other Culture'. Lannoy points out that this antipodal culture functions diametrically opposite to the hegemonic order. He goes on to describe the characteristics of these two cultures.

The hegemonic culture, which emphasizes order, obedience to rules, and regulations,

Stresses the differences and distinctions
Adheres to the taboos
Demands strictly 'open'
Calculated, careful living
Encourages competition and rivalry among caste groups

At the same time, in the antipodal culture that is outside the hegemonic one, we notice the following features that are opposed to the above:

Live as per an irrational motivation
Always transcend differences and move towards unity
Skip taboos
Live an epicurean life, a life of pleasure,
Unrestricted consumerism, community life

Cultural anthropologists have pointed out that among the oppressed people such as Dalits, women, and tribals these antipodal cultural features are easily discernible. In communities where division of labour, ownership of properties, and the individualistic behaviour related to these are less, among them the antipodal culture can be observed. During community worship and festivals, hedonistic behaviour and violations of normal mores are seen among most of these people. Ranajit Guha points out that rebellion against the East India Company and their allies—the local landlords by the Chandal and Munda tribes—usually began during their festivals. Even in the villages of Tamil Nadu, caste clashes are sparked off during festivals. In temple rituals, Dalits and women get possessed, go into a trance, and give oracles. This is nothing but an expression of the features of the deep-rooted protest culture in them.

Lennoy points out that there are some common cultural features between the tribal people and the 'untouchables' who are violently marginalized in the Brahmanical Hindu society:

> In common with Hindu lower castes, the tribals emphasize equality in social behaviour within the ethnic group, greater equality of status for women, more liberal relations between the sexes (men and women work together), a more personal relationship between husband and wife, a more 'romantic' type of courtship, love adventure, and love feuds, and, as would be expected, a greater emphasis on self-reliance in child care. Pollution rules are far more relaxed among the tribes than among castes. The, frank indulgence in pleasure, a strong sense of corporate identity and an absence of puritanism all favour the tribal passion for music and dance at which many tribes excel.*

* Richard Lennoy, 1974, *The Speaking Tree* (London: Oxford University Press).

All this fits into the characteristics of the antipodal culture described earlier. Among the educated Dalits who have moved into cities, the characteristics of counter culture are slowly disappearing due to the influence of the individualistic ideology of the West and Brahmanical Hindu culture. Though this counter culture has roots deep in the subconscious, many in urban areas consider this as being 'rustic and uncivilized' and deliberately try to hide them. When caste Hindus visit villages they consider this counter culture backward and unrefined and despise the villagers.

A Great Change

We have seen that among Dalits, as a support to the protest culture there are music groups and features of the 'Other' or counter culture that we see among women. These can be used to give the initial momentum to the movement. Now we will have to examine what methods should be followed to generate protest culture and make it part of the subconscious mind of the Dalits. In this context we have to recall some of the devices to be used in the first stage of the protest culture. Ambedkar listed inter-caste marriage, education, protest, destroying the Hindu shastras, and conversion as the devices. He asked if any Dalit could respect the Hindu laws of Manu which labels him 'untouchable' and say that he is not human at all. Ambedkar persuaded the Dalits to burn those laws. In fact, he himself burnt them. Periyar also chose this pioneering manner of protest. Periyar pointed out that unless there is an end to Hinduism and related religions, there will be no end to untouchability or caste. It has been emphasized that the culture of the oppressed is diametrically opposed to the hegemonic group. Merely by contemplation, Dalits cannot liberate themselves from the dominant culture that has made them an upside down, opposite identity people. This is not liberation of an individual we are talking about. It is a collective liberation of a people who have been suppressed as a community. So the protest culture of the Dalits will have to be totally new one. When Dalits project their culture this way, it would appear criminal, anarchist, and rebellious. Let it be so. It should appear so. Periyar pointed out that only if it appears rebellious would it indicate that the suppressed are active.

If this is criminal, if this is sinful, then each one of us can well commit this crime, this sin.

This statement is so appropriate to the context of Dalit protest culture.

Only in the form of counter culture can the Dalit people's movement participate in the liberation of humanity. Often in history the suppressed spawn violence. But people like the Dalits are victims and not perpetrators of violence. Each attempt of the Dalits to escape from the hold of their suppressers will be seen as violence and rebellion. The oppressor will describe the Dalit as rogue, barbaric, rowdy, and terrorist. What the accused said in the case of burning the Dalits alive in Venmani village proves this.

Earlier these coolies used to work hard
were respectful. They came and stood in the backyard
Now, influenced by the Communists, they appear and stand
In the veranda with their footwear on
They talk with us face to face, on equal terms
They have grown lazy and arrogant

It can be seen that if Dalits wear *chappals*, stand in the veranda, speak on equal terms, that itself is considered a deep insult for the upper caste.

One dimension of Dalit protest culture is to bring about an inversion. It should attack the 'sacred' and prestigious cultural symbols that help Brahmanical Hindu culture in retaining its hegemonic hold. If we were to break the dominant-slave order, we have to despise and discard the ideological symbols that brought about such a framework. If Dalits adopt such symbols it would mean that they accept this dominant-servile order. By accepting that order can the slave become the dominant one? A worker may become the factory owner or a poor man becomes a wealthy man. But can a Dalit become a Brahmin? He cannot. Because the dominant-servile order is decided by birth. Remember that it does not change even in death.

It is not our aim to become a capitalist, a rich man, or a Brahmin. To become a capitalist one needs a number of workers. Similarly, to become a wealthy person, there must be a lot of poor people. To become a Brahmin, you need to have a whole hierarchy of lower castes up to the Dalits.

That is why we reject the whole dominant-servile order. Only when Dalit protest culture destroys and discards this loathsome order can people realize that they need neither be a crypto Brahmin nor a Dalit but be human beings. When we talk about human beings it is not about an abstract, absolute human. We do not refer to those people who are supposed to have 'humanness' in them. Those who are not identified by either dominance or slavery are referred to here as 'human'.

These protests have created panic among the guardians of hegemonic culture. The Puranas predict that at the end of Kaliyuga the despicable Sudhras, would invert the cultural symbols of the other three *varna*s and appropriate them as their own. When Kaliyuga concludes, Brahmins will change like the sudhras, sudhra will morph into the Brahmin, the king like the thief, and the thief like the king, all change in inversion; The Brahmanical text *Vayu Purana* laments that wife will not be faithful to her husband and servants will refuse to obey the masters. In Christian mythology also we can see prophecies about such upside down changes in the context of the appearance of Anti-Christ during doomsday.

It has been pointed out earlier that the dominant person has attributed straight identity to himself and an opposite identity to the oppressed. In Dalit protest culture movement, these straight-opposite identities are shaken. For those who are dominating, these changes would appear anarchic and dangerous. On the other hand, for the Dalit this would augur happiness, equality, harmony, the freedom that arises out of an ownerless situation.

The Signs of Dominance-Slavery Relationship

In the hegemonic culture a number of signs have been developed to indicate the state of slavery. On the basis of semiotics, Ranajit Guha elaborately explains that these signs would depend on language, writing, gesture, and place. When a Dalit talks with one from a superior caste, he is expected to demean and debase himself. He should discount the house he lives in, his food, his status and all that is related to him. Often he will have to remain quiet without uttering a word. There should be no back bite. These are some of the regulations of language imposed on the Dalit by the hegemonic culture. If a Dalit ignores these restrictions even slightly, the dominant one will be outraged and brand him as arrogant and disrespectful. When the Dalit talks back, the direct and opposite identities, the self and the other get subverted. The Dalit gets relief from mental restrictions that bind him while the upper caste man is indignant that his direct identities are lost. No dominant person would like to loose his identity. Dalits should not adhere to these language regulations. They should not be silent. They should not keep their mouth shut. There is no need to degrade you. Talk! Keep talking! Talk aloud! Speak in your Tamil. Speak in your language that has been despised as *cheri* Tamil and colloquial Tamil! Transgress the elitist order of spoken language laid down by 'hegemonic culture'. The niceties in

handling certain prescribed words such as 'euphemism' and 'politeness' should be violated.

Education and Literacy

Similarly, education and literacy have been functioning as symbols of dominance here. When Dalit fieldhands in rural areas send their children to school, they are discouraged by the dominant one. 'What is he going to achieve by studying? Let him learn to graze the cattle properly.' You can see this happening even today. If a Dalit talks back it is pointed out as a pernicious outcome of education. Hindu shastras stress 'Don't go to school, toil in the field, slog as a slave.' Will not the whole paradigm of direct identity and opposite identity get reversed if the Dalits get educated? Did not Manu lay down that if any Dalit reads or even listens to the Vedas, his limbs should be mutilated? Realizing this Ambedkar gave importance to education in the scheme of things that he suggested to the Dalits. In the protest culture of Dalits education is one of the processes of reversing paradigms.

Body Language

In the same way, body language, gestures, measures of time and place all act as signs that distinguish the oppressed state of the Dalits. In the pre-literacy era, each community utilized the human body as the site for saving the basics of its culture. In those time there was no other instrument of recording than the body. The Hindu sastras detail the signs that have been documented in the body. Manu has listed actions such as standing up when someone comes, wrapping the stole around the waist, touching the feet and prostrating, as the bodily gestures that symbolize slave state and lowly position. This applies also to women. It has been stated that the above bodily gestures should be used by son to the father, wife to the husband, slave to the master, low caste to upper caste, disciple to his guru, and a devotee to god to establish their lowliness. Dalits should defy and discard these rules. Do not fall at anyone's feet! Do not tie the shoulder cloth around the waist! Do not stand with hands folded across the chest! Do not bend! Do not bow your heads! Should stand firm, straight, thrusting the chest forward. Should not keep a distance from the upper caste man. Should not take up residence away from the village. Similarly, Dalits should start using aluminium or eversilver vessels instead of mud vessels. Here mud pots

should be given up not because it is stigmatized but because the upper castes insist that Dalits should use only mud vessels. In other words, whatever is seen as being appropriate for and to Dalits, and is expected of them to follow to establish their slave status—all those practices should be diligently avoided.

Action according to the Place

Though poverty, starvation, ignorance, and unemployment are common in all the villages of India, the hierarchy of caste structure and the related cultural variations differ from village to village. This is because the features of hegemonic culture that tighten the slavish conditions can differ according to the place. In a village rules laid by the upper caste might say that the Dalits eat beef and drink arrack as a part of their despicable life style. In such a situation Dalits should eschew beef and liquor as a part of the protest culture strategy that aims at reversing the paradigms. But you may not be able to follow the same strategy in another place where the order of dominance is different. For economic reasons, or to shock the dominant caste, or because there Dalits live in a majority, Dalits can eat beef, drink arrack. What is important here is that we as Dalits should carry out these actions consciously as part of the protest culture.

When such a protest culture is formed, Dalits have necessarily to operate within the cultural ambience of the opponent group. There is no other way. You have to select your weapons from the very hegemonic order you have been compelled to protest against. As part of the struggle, Dalits have to participate in Hinduism, caste, and Hinduized-Christian worship. It is true that Dalits are not Hindus. They are outside the pale of caste. Still, they have to carry out their protest using the same caste and religion as media. Some people may label this opportunism. They will point out that this is not an honest approach. Our answer to this criticism should be that we do not need such honesty, ethics, justice, dharma, and all such rubbish. Our interest in issues like Hinduism. Hinduized Christianity, issues like caste, temple entry, right to worship, right to become a priest, is only with the idea of obliterating them.

We follow these strategies to take forward our Dalit protest culture as a movement. And through that path enable ourselves and our descendents to stand as human beings. In Dalit history, whenever there have been clashes in the rural area the people of lowly castes who have opposed the upper caste desisted from killing them. It was not out of compassion. The low castes are caught in the Brahmanic-Hindu cultural mesh spread by the upper caste and are just too weak to free themselves and rise.

—Translated by S. Theodore Baskaran

Arunthathiyars
*Problems of Language, Race, and Caste Identity**

Ra. Athiyaman

Chakkiliyar, Maadhigaa, Maadhaari, Pagadai, Thotti, Chemmaan—under these names Arunthathiyars have spread so widely that there is not a town in Tamil Nadu where they are not to be found. They are the working class involved in cleaning jobs, stitching chappals, as workers in agricultural fields, and so on. Everybody can see them in these above-mentioned jobs, working with no differentiation between men and women. Nowadays they can be seen working as porters, pulling handcarts, picking paper, and in construction works.

The language spoken by the majority of them in Tamil Nadu is Telugu. They also speak Kannada in a few places and Tamil in few other places.

Even though the language they speak is Telugu, they do not know either to read or write it. It remains the language that is only spoken at home. They speak to others only in Tamil. Their children go only to Tamil-medium schools.

That the people of this caste who are the Scheduled Caste are even worse off than the other 'Dalits' is a widely recognized fact.

Even the other divisions of the so-called downtrodden do not accept them or treat them as equals. Two causes are considered responsible for this:

1. They do the cleaning jobs that others do not venture to or refuse to do.
2. They eat the flesh of dead cattle.

* Original title *Mozhi Adayalam, Ina Adayalam, Jati Adayalam: Arunthathiyars Ethirkollum Pirachanaikal.*

It is important to understand the meaning of the second cause—that they 'eat beef'. Nobody can eat beef when the animal is alive. Not just large cattle, any animal can be eaten only after it is dead.Therefore, they are subject to what is called 'untouchability'. (That now, with everybody eating it, beef has become very expensive is another matter.)

An important cause of their low status is that they do not have the option of good education.

After the Englishmen started ruling this country, it became possible for the Pariahs who were known as Adi Dravidas to be absorbed in the fields of education and medicine. Christianity also accepted them and helped them to grow. Because of this, they could get positions in the Church. If you look at their employment profile now, you will find them mostly in teaching or jobs in urban security systems.

In Tamil Nadu, most of the Pallars, also known as the 'Devendrakula Vellalar', are a little better of than that of the other downtrodden communities. These people who own small plots of agricultural land never experienced untouchability. They do not eat beef. Since they too have embraced Christianity to a degree, their opportunities for education and jobs have improved slightly.

The following causes can be cited for the low status of the Arunthathiyars:

1. They did not opt for religious conversion in big numbers.
2. The colloquial Telugu and Kannada that they speak.
3. Their eating beef and doing menial jobs.
4. Their complete lack of opportunity in education.

It is wrong for the dominant Telugu-speaking castes like the Naidus, Devaanga Chettiars, and Reddiars who control more than half the economic resources of the Tamil land and are in a position to crow over others to consider these hardworking Arunthathiyars who speak an impure dialect of Telugu as people of another language, immigrants, and a minority.

The Arunththiyars, the sons of this soil, have been mentioned in history when the Vijayanagara empire attacked the Tamil region in the seventeenth century. In all the intervening centuries, from then till now, they have become living corpses by working for the same land and for the dominant castes of the same land.

The Tamils were the first settlers in the Indian subcontinent. When the dominant caste Tamilians mixed with the immigrants, the low caste Tamil people became separate and degraded. According to Ambedkar all

the downtrodden people of India have a common cultural background. Since the conclusion of Ambedkar concurs with the linguist Paavaanar, the matter needs an in-depth study.

Under these conditions when different national types changed into different castes as the locals and the immigrants intermixed, speaking an impure language can only be the result of ignorance. If today somebody should be identified as a pure Tamilian, only the downtrodden meet that description. That too, the Chakkiliyars in particular. Yes, they are indeed the ancient Tamilians!

They are the people who four centuries ago returned to Tamil Nadu from that part which became Telugu speaking, to become one with the dust of Tamil Nadu.

Though they speak Telugu, they do not know how to read or write. And because they speak Telugu they are excluded. It is the greatest cruelty to identify these people, who are entirely Tamilian as Telugu people. What is it but a plot to divide the working people?

Ezhil Elangovanin his article, 'The Arunthathiyars in the Seventeenth Century' says, 'Even though Arunthathiyars had come to Tamil Nadu during the rule of Viswanatha Nayaka in the sixteenth and King Tirumalai Nayaka in the seventeenth century, it was only in the seventeenth century that the Arunthathiyars came to be regarded as "Chakkiliyars". Just as the conflict between Right-hand and Left-hand* castes led to a struggle between the Pariahs and the Pallars, conflict erupted between Pariahs and Chakkiliyars as the latter wore the red flowers, which was the symbol of the Left-hand castes.' This statement of Professor K.K. Pillai was endorsed by the Marxist scholar Ko. Kesavan in his book, *Samooka Viduthalaiyum Thalthappattorum* (The Untouchables and Social Liberation).

It is interesting to note that no reference to Chakkiliyars appeared in the division of Right-hand and Left-hand castes till sixteenth century. It began appearing only after the seventeenth century during the rule of King Thirumalai Nayaka in Tamil Nadu. Only if we pay attention to such facts, can we surely say that these people were branded as Chakkiliyars during the seventeenth century and not in the earlier history.

The Arunthathiyars now have to oppose the dominant Naidus who trapped them by merely accommodating them as 'Telugus' and

* Scholars say that the 'Right-hand' refers to the natives of a particular region and 'Left-hand' to a migratory group. There were continuous conflicts between the two.

the dominant Tamilians who marginalized them as 'Telugus'. Since this kind of awareness will cause damage to the dominant Tamil and Telugu castes, today Arunthathiyars are maliciously constructed as 'alien' to the Tamil land. All these dominant castes in some way succumbed themselves to Brahminism. It is the Brahminical blood that runs through them. Even before the evolution of Telugu language, the language spoken by the forefathers of Arunthathiyars was Tamil that is why we urge the Arunthathiyars to call themselves 'Aathi Tamilar', meaning 'original Tamils'.

Let us unite with the Pallars, the Pariahs and the other marginalized Tamils, who like the Arunthathiyars toil in the Tamil land, and fight for the freedom of the Tamils along with that of Aadi Yamilars.

—Translated by Meera Rajagopalan

Land
*Woman's Breath and Speech**

P. Sivakami

The moment one is engrossed in subtly analysing the universe with its earth, planets, and the sky, one is lost in wonder. Among these, till date it is only the earth that has struck our intellect as a place for living organism to exist. Is the earth a supra life, begetting million of living organisms, or is it a mere globe? It keeps revolving because of the indwelling fire of life force. When we look at how it rejuvenates itself in the vibrations of its motion, how it creates myriad life-forms in the fusion of organic minerals, the earth gives the impression that it is a gigantic living being. Can we measure such a colossal force by the narrow term 'land'?

Although, today, the term 'land' is mentioned, it is taken as an area which has been made fertile by man for his living. Ancient Tamils did not reduce it like that. Linking *thinai*, that is the land which comprised the plants and other living organisms in that space of land with the sensibilities of the people, they had divided it into five thinais such as hill and the area surrounding it, forest and the area surrounding it, and

* Original title *Nilam: Penkalin Moochum, Pechum.*

plains and the area surrounding it. They denoted the names of such spaces in terms of the vegetations that were widespread in those regions. The regions which were named after the plants growing there, depending on the climate and water resources, have come to be, in course of time, considering the primary gained by man, named after his language or after his lineage.

It is clear that the reason for this is not so much the primacy gained by man as the dominance over the land and the right to hold private property. Human civilization (that is dominance over the land) which started with protecting itself against threat from natural disasters and agriculture for livelihood, has kept expanding into violent appropriation in the guise of increase in production, trade, and capture of countries, marauding and looting resources, ostentation, not for a moment taking into account the environment.

In this context, it is worthwhile, first of all, to ascertain whether 'land' must denote that which is the very basis of existence for living beings, inclusive of plants, animals, and man, or regarded as government property and private property either in accordance with or in consonance with the changing laws of the nation. Before examining the demand of women that land must be allotted in their names, it is best to set right the perspective on land.

Land, without doubt, is the basis of existence for all living creatures. This is our policy regarding land. Once we frame such a policy of land, then starts all the regulating and codifying, based on that. For example, man's activities entail dominance over land and strategies to hike or lower the value of land. Water resources and mineral resources too come within the ambit of human activity. On the other hand, when our approach to land is to view it as a source of existence, the worth of land remains even or unchanging. The same dry land which is considered of less value, becomes valuable when it is regarded as the very basis of life for a variety of plants and different kinds of living creatures on it. Until the era of the Green Revolution, dry land crops like pearl millet, maize, bajra, ragi, Italian millet, and samai dominated the food-culture of the Tamils. Once the cultivation of rice made a quantum leap, thanks to the Green Revolution and wheat from the north was made available at affordable prices at the ration shops, the above-mentioned dry land crops of the Tamil country, although as nutritious as rice and wheat, in fact even more beneficial in some ways, not only lost their value but have, sadly, disappeared. Had the land been classified in terms of the

source of living, such a predicament would not have come into being. Even our forests and wild life too would have been protected.

Moreover, had we regarded the land as the very basis of existence, it would have been possible to have prevented the ownership of land being concentrated in just a few hands. It is good to discuss this in detail, to a certain extent.

Although in India, as per history, the system of land disbursement has been in vogue from ancient times, it is only after the British rule that the idea of private ownership emerges. The British government which began with trade in 1600, gradually capturing the country, comes to grasp, only more or less 200 years later, the land disbursement system and turns it into private ownership to suit its purpose for its own advantage. It was only towards the end of the eighteenth century that settlement measures were brought in to establish private ownership. It also means that the history of the properties of caste groups such as Mooppanars and the Vaandayars 200 years earlier, had no individual or private land settlement record.

Towards the close of the eighteenth century, in the regions under the rule of the Mughals, the system of mansabdar jagir was slowly becoming defunct. As per this system, large portions of land were assigned under the zamindars' jurisdiction for the purpose of assisting the emperor with armed forces. The zamindars had no right to transfer them to others or their heirs without the express orders of the government or the emperor. But whenever the government at the centre became weak, the zamindars started claiming succession rights over the jagir lands which were assigned to their custody. Thus, in all the regions which were under the Moghul rule, consequent upon the fall of the empire, the landlords claimed succession rights over the land and started becoming powerful in the political arena too. Therefore, from the thirteenth to the end of the eighteenth century, rights over land remained as an issue not determined in any clear terms.

In the Tamil region, those who enjoyed such rights were called agnates or *mirasdars*. These people had the right to use the land, the right to govern the village lands, and held a share in the profits that accrued from woods, lakes and fruit trees. This 'share' does not denote the area of the land. Someone who had been an agnate for one specific piece of land for a few years, was an agnate for a different piece of land for a different set of years. In 1818 in Tirunelveli and in 1921 in Thanjavur, there are evidences to show that such a system prevailed.

It was only in 1792, that for the first time, lands were all brought under proper survey and their tax fixed. During the interim period between 1792 and 1801, settlement deed was given to those farmers, who were custodians of the crop in the land leased to them in Salem, Coimbatore, Madurai, and finally in the whole of Madras Presidency.

Although this measure of the British government turned out to be beneficial to the lessee, their desire to abolish the land endowment system was with the view to compensating for the meager land-tax collection through the zamindars. When land settlement deeds were issued, this was the only aspect they had borne in mind; hence, it was distributed on the basis of the lands leased. Thanks to the atrocious practice of untouchability, the 'untouchables', who were denied the privilege of holding any property whatsoever, did not find a place in the settlement policy. They remained, as was the custom, as landless agricultural coolies, as well as, bonded labourers.

Neither the abolition of the zamindari system nor the transfer of leased lands to the hands of those farmers who were hitherto enjoying them, did forbid private owners accumulating land. Land-Ceiling Act was enforced in 1961. The background to this was the various struggles launched by Ambedkar in 1916, and carried on till 1949. If in Bombay the 20,000 strong mammoth procession and protest, staged on 12 January 1938, brought to an end the 'Koti' sytem (the zamindari system) that prevailed in Bombay and Gujarat, in January 1969, in Hyderabad state, the one lakh strong massive rally, considered in those days, the biggest battle for land in Asia, paved the way for these legislations. Even so, the Act of 1961 did not take into consideration the point that land is the source of existence, nor did it bear in mind the dictum, 'land for the tiller'. The Land Ceiling Act of 1961 allowed that if a family had more than five members, it could hold additional lands and that on the whole, each family can own up to 60 acres. In 1972, this act was amended. The holding was reduced as 15 acres for a family of five.

The acre mentioned in this act is referred to as standard acre. From this, the standard acre in vogue is to be construed as three ordinary acres. Therefore, as per the existing act, it is understood that a family of five can hold 45 acres. It goes without saying, who is the beneficiary when one family is permitted to hold 45 acres of land while about 70 per cent of the people are dependent on agriculture for their livelihood. On what basis this ceiling was drawn, remains a mystery.

The reason is a book which outlines the history of Indian economy, published by Oxford University Press, points to a debate that took place during the British rule. In the nineteenth century, a time when there were no scientific inventions, no pesticides, and chemical fertilizers, they had taken the decision that for a family of five members, five acres were sufficient. On the contrary, in the present time with all its inventions, to take a decision that each family can have 45 acres not only exposes the biased stance of the government, but helps us infer that it is nothing but the keenness to promote private ownership.

Moreover, during monarchical reigns, it was land which was the means for the government's entire revenue. Alas, today revenue from land has shrunk to Rs 4 per acre on an average. When a tax of Rs 2 is levied on a Hamam soap, to levy Rs 4 as income tax per acre, is a testimony to the ruined state of land economy. The price of agricultural produce is brought under control by tax waivers for the landed, on the yield. This price control, which ironically purports to bear in mind the landless agricultural labourers and the poor, also deceives the people. On the argument that the landless agricultural labourers and the poor should be able to get food without any shortage, procuring rice, wheat, etc. on nominal price, it distributes them to ration shops through what is called public distribution system. At present the amount the central government spend for distribution is Rs 11,000 crore per annum. This amount is spent through the public sector concern, Food Corporation of India (FCI), which includes procurement, warehouse storage, flour mills, vehicles, personnel, etc. This public distribution system has been zealously protected for ages, being neither profitable for those farmers from whom procurement is made, nor successful in raising the standard of living of the poor.

When we have adequate lands to amend the law and offer land to those who are directly dependent on land for their livelihood, to those who directly till the land, and to those who are agricultural coolies, the fact of the existing laws permitting 45 acres per family, most of the existing agricultural lands lying uncultivated, and deficiency in the production of food, only point to the deteriorating condition of the agricultural economy. One also hears the complaint that we have no land to offer the agricultural coolies.

The report of an individual volunteering to offer 500 acres of land in his possession to the Tatas, has been published recently in a daily newspaper. The question arises as to how 500 acres of land came into

the hands of an individual. Similarly, the practice of buying agricultural lands for other purposes has been going on in recent times in a secretive manner. The newspapers have been highlighting how the ruling class, particularly the politicians, are engaged in land looting. When agriculture has been losing its worth and is almost profitless, the value of land alone is soaring. How does this happen? Since the concept of the land as the means of livelihood, as the device for enhancing the income, and as Amudhasurabi (the perennial source), providing employment to majority of people of this country has changed, and there now exists a state where industrialists, enormously rich people, and the high-salaried private as well as government officials, capture agricultural lands and escape from paying income tax upon their profit by showing that they have incurred a loss as they have used the land for agriculture. These lands that they hold, have been converted, by and large, into uncultivable lands or into one where trees and cash crops that require less maintenance are grown. Even non-resident Indians living abroad have agricultural lands here. Those who are employed elsewhere, who do not even pay a short visit once in a year to the farm lands they hold, have agricultural lands too. Even an erstwhile well-to-do farmer who had later altered his occupation to include multiple businesses such as running rice mill, petrol bunk, and cotton mill, has cultivable lands.

Hence it is evident that those for whom land is not a necessity and who do not require it for their livelihood, have land, whereas those whose sole occupation is agriculture do not have any land. Should a legislation be passed that 'land is livelihood', priority will be given only to those landless agricultural coolies. Similarly, forest conservation, sanctuaries of forests and plants for animals, will also be created.

It is only on such an understanding that the plea for granting land for women as the basis of existence is made.

Men and women together have carried out the agricultural labour. While, ploughing, driving the bullock-cart, setting up embankment by shovelling sand, drawing water with water-lift were chores mostly done by the men; replanting the seedling, weeding, harvesting, were tasks performed by the women; and threshing the grain, carrying the weight were jobs both sexes could do. Despite this, woman by virtue of her marriage ties, is removed from her land of birth only to be later rendered as one deprived of all rights. Our family structure expects from woman love, kindness, patience, sacrifice, and all such good traits, but does not give her separate entitlements to agricultural land nor in the house

where she lives. Is it believed that the sheer fear that she has been left with nothing to fall back upon would inculcate the amicable qualities listed above?

In India every year, approximately two lakh women are subjected to atrocities. These are the recorded ones. Those not recorded may run to a few lakhs. There is a similarity among majority of those women who are targets of murder, sexual violence, battering, being subjected to mental torture. That is, these women do not have any property, whatsoever, be it land or house. Lack of education is the point. When the total number of women affected, every year, by accident, tsunami, floods, famine, war, does not come anywhere near this tally, the preventive measure would inevitably be to grant land to women as the basis of existence, to transfer housing plots in towns in their names. Already, the revenue department is handing over poramboke lands to those who have been enjoying them, after scrutiny. However, this is a strategy to see that no poramboke lands, no pond, pool, grazing fields, are left. The Land Ceiling Act must be amended and a scheme to grant poramboke lands must be launched.

When it is understood that enslavement of women is not only based on the oppression issuing from gender discrimination, but also on the repression based on land ownership, then land becomes the starting point of woman's liberation.

At a time when it is argued that feminism is synonymous with body politics, feminism is nothing but body politics, the argument that feminism means—sharing land resources—must also blossom. Land must be a subject of debate in women's discussions and writings.

The Third Revolution is a women's liberation which is centred on land.

Courtesy: 'Theeraanadi', November 2008
Pudiya Kodangi, May 2009

—Translated by C.T. Indra and Meenakshi Hariharan

Search for Self in an Urban Jungle

Notes on Contemporary Art

Indran

A critical revisit to the process of urbanization of Chennai is a rewarding exercise for an understanding of the paradigm-shifts that have taken place in aesthetic, conceptual, and technical aspects of contemporary art in the city. A dialogue between the history of Chennai and modern manifestations of its art, plunges itself into the undercurrents of multiple visual realities constructed by new generations of painters, sculptors, print-makers, and installation artists.

The birth of Chennai as the first colonial city of British India is directly linked with the socio-economic factors which worked for the emergence of a modern expression in Indian art. The first Indian town, 'Black Town' (later named George Town) came into existence as a result of a migratory population of painters, weavers, dyers, and blockmakers from various parts of south India like Palacole and Petapoli, known for their superior Masulipatnam paintings. They brought with them age-old skills and an understanding of Indian art traditions and settled around Fort St George, built by the East India Company in 1640.

When many of them were employed by the East India Company as mapmakers and draughtsmen and Colonel Colin Mackenzie recruited them in his enterprise of amassing histories and oral traditions of south India, there was an interesting intercultural dialogue.

Company School and Colonial Modernity

According to Mildred Archer who worked extensively on the art of the British period, paintings were being specially produced for the Europeans in Madras by the end of the seventeenth century. In 1702 alone, 78 paintings were produced by an Indian artist for Niccolao Manucci, the Italian traveller and writer who was engaged in writing his *Storia do Mogor*. For the fourth volume of his book, to render Indian manners and customs, he hired Indian artists to make illustrations of men and women according to their caste costumes and other cultural identities. At the same time, a number of British officers belonging to the Royal Troops themselves were amateur artists and were anxious to

collect pictures of prevailing customs and costumes of India to take back to Britain as souvenirs.

In these illustrations and paintings the pre-modern and pre-colonial Indian pictorial language of the native artists underwent many interesting changes. Rugged profiles, swaggering stances of human forms, horizontal clouds in the sky—all started appearing. Sombre tones, elongated figures, widespread use of watercolour techniques, and European paper constituted a distinct style, that came to be know as 'Company School' among art historians.

Originating in Madras, the Company School subsequently spread to Thanjavur and Madurai. By 1830, an offshoot of the Company School in Thanjavur had developed in Trichy. Many native painters started selling their paintings which portrayed Rockfort and other areas of tourist interest. Etienne Alexander Rodriquez, the company head draughtsman followed the Company School with particular reference to the Trichinopoly style and published *The Hindu Pantheon* (1841) and *The Religion of Visnu* (1850) through the Oriental Lithographic Press in Madras.

A striking synthesis of various art traditions, the Company School further developed and spread to Calcutta, Patna, Benares, and Oudh, and then to Delhi and Agra. A little later the style spread to Lucknow and Punjab as well. In spite of the face that the Company School was considered a degeneration of high art, it was very popular.

The Art of Portraiture and Watercolour Landscapes

During the period of black-and-white photography, the art of colour portraiture, a synthesis of Western and Eastern styles of painting, made its entry. Portraits were done in such a way as to reflect the interest, environment, status, and vocation of the person portrayed. They depicted men and women with various caste identities standing by, holding the implements of their occupation.

Because of the influence of British painters like William Turner, landscapes, which were used in the Indian tradition only as a backdrop or as an instrument to create the required *dhwani* or mood for a painting, acquired independent status as artworks. The newly introduced medium of watercolour accentuated the popularity of landscapes.

Art-Craft School and a New Visual Culture

In the early days of Madras, a new visual culture in the form of architecture was brought in. The original Dravidian and Indo-Saracenic architecture gave way to British architecture. Right from St Mary's Church constructed inside Fort St George, many churches built in the city adopted Gothic architecture and stained glass painting.

An oil painting on the biblical theme of 'The Last Supper' finds place at the altar of St Mary's Church even today and could possible be the first European painting to enter India. The European realistic style and the novel treatment of colour in the new medium of oil was well received by Indians as a part of Modernist elitism.

When Madras gradually took over the position of cultural hub of south India, Dr Alexander Hunter chose the city for establishing a School of Industrial Art in May 1850. Because the opening of art schools was considered part of the British mission of 'civilizing' Indians, the school was further developed with a new name—The School of Arts and Crafts—and shifted from Popham's Broadway to a new location on a four-acre plot in Egmore, where the Government College of Fine Arts now stands. It gained popularity in training students in many Indian craft traditions such as ornamental pottery, metalware, wood carving, etc. The success of the Madras School of Arts and Crafts encourage the British to start many such art schools in Calcutta (1852), Bombay (1857), Lahore (1875), and Lucknow (1911).

After the revolt of 1857, when power shifted from the East India Company to the British parliament, art education in the style of the Royal School of Art, London, was introduced into the Madras school's syllabus. Indian painters were taught charcoal drawing, oil painting, and watercolour painting, along with the principles of perspective, chiaroscuro, and human anatomy.

In pre-colonial India, the secrets of art and craft techniques had been preserved and handed down from generation to generation, within the same family of the same caste. For the first time in the history of India, caste barriers were broken through education in various art-craft tradition. Because art education was open to all castes and communities, a stream of fresh energy came into the field and worked towards the modernization of Indian art.

Advocates of Revivalism in Indian Art

Ernst B. Havell was an admirer of Indian art traditions and during his tenure as principal at the School of Arts and Crafts in Madras (1884–92), due encouragement was given for the emergence of a new modern Indian art from the art tradition of the soil. The movement was carried forward at other centres by Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, Rabindranath Tagore, a close disciple of E.B. Havell, carried forward the mission of his teacher and strove to revive the Mughal miniature and Ajanta fresco styles in search of a real 'Modern Indian Art'. In his Oriental School of Indian Art (Calcutta) he had two top students—Nandalal Bose and Devi Prasad Roy Choudhury. Nandanlal Bose went to Santiniketan to take charge of Kala Bhavan at Visva-Bharati University, while D.P. Roy Choudhury, came to Madras as the principal of the School of Arts and Crafts.

D.P. Roy Choudhury and the Madras Art World

In 1929, when D.P. Roy Choudhury assumed charge as the first Indian principal of the Madras School of Arts and Crafts, the institution began to attract students like Gopal Ghosh, Sushil Mukherjee, Paritosh Sen, and Pradosh Das Gupta from Bengal; K.C.S. Paniker and many others from Kerala; K. Srinivasulu Narasimhamurty and H.V. Ramgopal from Andhra Pradesh; and J. Sultan Ali from Maharashtra as well as S. Dhanapal from Madras itself. This element of openness to all students from various parts of India characterized the Madras School of Arts and Crafts and placed Madras right at the top of the art education map of India.

During his tenure from 1929 to 1957, Roy Choudhury was affectionately called Devi-da and was considered 'the classic father figure of the new generation of artists'. Sushil Mukherjee, one of his art students, in his autobiography writes about his art school days in a chapter titled 'Devi Prasad and his disciples at Madras School of Arts'.

He was also the most colourful and romantic Indian artist of the time. Although a student of Abanindranath Tagore, the leader of the Bengal revivalist school, he was considered a rebel by his peers because his work indicated the rejection of the lyrical, sentimental style of the Bengal School and a preference for Western technique. So it was that as a very young man, naïve in the ways of the world, I had ventured

to travel all the 1,200 miles from Ranchi in Bihar to join the Madras School of Art and to be a disciple of Devi Prasad Roy Choudhury.

Roy Choudhury's training under Signor Boless, an Italian painter made him aware of Western techniques in art. As he was temperamentally very open and sufficiently non-conformist, he inspired his students to work in various mediums and styles, right from British academism to Western Impressionism.

Reaction of Madras to Bengal Revivalism

Although the in-built spirit of nationalism in the Bengal art movement was attractive to the artists of Madras, they found that it had no bearing on local traditions. So while they followed Nandalal Bose and Jamini Roy who were inspired by Ajanta and *patua* paintings, they began a parallel search for their own art traditions. K.C.S. Paniker, S. Dhanapal, and others sought inspiration from Thanjavur fresco paintings, native horoscope drawings, etc. While Sultan Ali found his style in tribal and primitive art, K. Srinivasulu followed Lepakshi frescos, Kondapalli and Tirupati wooden dolls. But there were artists who revolted against nationalist and revivalist tendencies. Artists like A.P. Santhanaraj and L. Munuswamy were adventurous enough for a process of self-discovery in their art. By wading through the Bengal art trends and various European art movements they found their own idiom.

K.C.S. Paniker and the School of Abstraction

When K.C.S. Paniker succeeded Roy Choudhury as principal of the Madras School of Arts and Crafts in 1957, he encouraged his students to travel in new directions. He had a good team of talented teachers like S. Dhanapal, H.V. Ramgopal, and Krishna Rao with him.

Paniker with a group of brilliant students like A.P. Santhanaraj, Reddappa Naidu, K. Ramanujam, L. Munuswamy, and others tried to relieve contemporary art expression from the heavy burden of 'realism' of the modern European analytical style. While he was a strong advocate for an artist 'Indian in spirit and worldwide contemporary' he initiated a new style by 'abstracting complexes of linear rhythms'. Paniker's 'Words and Symbols' series inspired many including K.V. Haridasan who evolved an abstract language in his neo-tantric paintings. During Paniker's time the art trend in Madras was acknowledged as a distinct

Madras school. Till his death in 1977, he tirelessly campaigned for south Indian artists at the national and international level.

Cholamandal: The Artists' Village

Sociologist Georg Simmel in *The Metropolis and Mental Life* (1950), comments that 'the Metropolis assaults the senses to the point where people turn inward in order to survive the sensory overload of the modern urban jungle'. In the light of his explanation we can realize how modernism's subjectivity arose from the modern existence. Madras's metamorphosis into a metropolitan city has taken away the sociability normally found in small towns and villages.

We can realize this fact in the founding of the Cholamandal Artists' Village by K.C.S. Paniker in 1966. On his retirement from the Madras School of Arts and Crafts, Paniker established a settlement of a rare kind where a group of artists could live together as a cooperative and share the infrastructure of the village which they jointly owned. Along with some of his students he moved to a strip of land, about 4 hectares in area, on the Coromandel Coast near Injambakkam village 20 km from Madras on the road to Mahabalipuram.

When the thirty members of Cholamandal occupied the village there was no electricity, no proper road, no bus service or conveyance of any sort. They lived with the inwardness forced by this isolation and worked with the objective of coming out of the Anglo centric parameters structured by colonial art schools, living a new way of contemporary art. Cholamandal Artists' Village is a rare dream of one man, successfully actualized, and even today commands pride of place in the Indian art world.

If we take the art works of the Cholamandal artists, whether they be the works of K.V. Haridasan or C. Douglas, P. Gopinath or M. Senathipati, S.P. Jayakar or K. Ramanujam, V. Viswanathan or S.G. Vasudev, S. Paramasivam or S. Nandagopal, K.M. Gopal or P.S. Nandhan, V. Arnavaz or Akitham Narayanan, K. Jayapal Paniker or D. Venkatapathy, one can find a new individualism reflected in their work. This is the result of the return of the artists to 'life and nature, the perennial inspiration to man's creative faculties for a fresh and vital new experience'.

The Shifting 1960s

When the Lalit Kala Akademi was established at New Delhi in 1954 with D.P. Roy Choudhury as its first secretary, the art climate in Madras was very favourable for experiments. Post-Independence conditions accelerated the end of the colonial phase of Indian art. A state-funded Lalit Kala Akademi was also established subsequently. Many foreign connections came through agencies like the British Council, Alliance Francaise, Max Muller Bhavan, and the American Center.

Many painters and sculptors like P.V. Janakiram, K.N. Adhimoolam, Alphonso Arul Doss, R.B. Bhaskaran, T.R.P. Mookiah, S. Murugesan, M.K. Muthuswamy, P. Perumal, S.K. Rajavelu, M. Suriyamurthy, P.B. Surendranath, C. Dakshinamoorthy, all with an extraordinary energy and vigour brought a new experience and vision into creative expression. Although most of them were working in different directions, they were all shouldering two crosses: Western modern expression and a culturally coded native expression. But outstanding creative souls like K. Ramanujam of Cholamandal had escaped this predicament because they had gained full freedom from the known theories of art. The works of K. Ramanujam, who died prematurely, were strictly dictated by his own dream world.

Reddappa Naidu lent a contemporary treatment to classical literary texts like Shakuntala, Ramayana, and Mahabharata. He gave sensitive titles to his paintings: 'All the world is pervaded by me but I stand apart from them.' R.B. Bhaskaran, who is popularly known for his treatment of cats, has a stamp of his own in multiple mediums such as drawing, painting, and graphics. P. Perumal with a strong Fauvist spirit, brought in the multifaceted Indian village life with all its vitality. Although C.J. Anthony Doss and Alphonso Arul Doss excelled in academic painting, Alphonso with his fascination for the behaviour of light found his own idiom of expression.

Sculpture as a Part of City Environment

During the colonial period, like the art of portraiture, sculpture in the form of statues and busts in marble, bronze, and plaster was also given public patronage. Many sculptors like Nagappa started working in realistic academic style. D.P. Roy Choudhury did many figurative experiments like the 'The Triumph of Labour', which was subsequently erected on Marina Beach. As part of a project of beautification of the city

and a Dravidian political act of glorification of ancient Tamil culture, an array of statues of various Tamil poets and scholars was erected on the beach road.

Besides public art, there emerged an energetic generation of fine-art scholars. S. Dhanapal, eminent sculptor and guardian angel of a new generation of artists, extended the linear forms of the Pallava and Chola period to contemporary art. Commenting on his work, K.C.S. Paniker wrote, 'his sculptures imbibed no only the best traditions of his native country but also interesting aspects of world sculpture'. P.V. Janakiram, a pioneer in sheet-metal sculpture, revived the iconic art with a contemporary touch. T.R.P. Mookiah, a sculptor of a rare kind, with the raw power similar to that of Ramkinker Baij, focused on folk subjects. S. Kanniappan experimented from various mediums like terracotta, ceramic, and sheet metal. K.M. Gopal from Cholamandal created myriad forms of Hindu iconic images with strong tantric undertones as metal-relief and sheet-metal sculptures. Also from Cholamandal, P.S. Nandhan has a unique style of expression in his favourite medium of granite, while S. Nandagopal, in his frontal sculptures in welding copper and brass sheets articulates the myth and craft traditions of the soil.

Print-making as a Creative Medium

The art of print-making in Madras got special attention when Paul Lingren came for a national-level graphics workshop conducted by the American Information Center in June 1970 in New Delhi. But even before this workshop, R.B. Bhaskaran had been to Israel on a UNESCO Scholarship for training under Professor Rubenstein. When he became head of the department of print-making at the Government College of Fine Arts, he inspired many young artists to try their hand at etching, lithography, and linocut.

When Lalit Kala Akademi decided to establish a regional centre for south India, it chose Chennai as the centre. This restored the status of Chennai as the centre for art activities.

When a permanent graphics workshop was instituted at the regional centre of Lalit Kala Akademi, Rm. Palaniappan, one of R.B. Bhaskaran's graphic art students and an artist who had earned international acclaim for his graphic works, took charge of the graphics workshop.

Now the regional centre has started attracting students to learn the art of print-making.

Morphology of the Metropolitan Artist

The introduction of multiple contexts for contemporary art in Chennai today—where an accelerated urbanization with fast-changing cultural patterns and lifestyles is taking place—presents a legitimate dilemma for a relevant visual vocabulary. A new generation of artists like Rm. Palaniappan, C. Douglas, Achuthan Kudallur, K. Muralidharan, A.V. Illango, Valson Kolleri, and others in Chennai engage themselves for a post-nationalist aesthetic and try to speak a postmodern language of art.

The growing number of galleries, collectors, critics, and a new generation of artists who have grown impatient with conventional mediums of expression and aspire to identify themselves with a growing internationalist agenda prove that the Chennai art world is preparing itself for a giant leap forward.

Heritage
Outlines of a Past

G. Chandrasekaran and K.T. Gandhirajan

The Site at Karikkiyoor—Largest such Panel in South India

It wasn't too long ago when a team of artists, an art historian, and a photographer from the Chennai College of Fine Arts and the ROOTS organization were at Kotagiri, in the Nilgiris, to impart art and crafts training to tribal youth at the Don Bosco Community College. All this under the tutelage of the artist, Chandrasekaran (Chandru).

It was during this time that a team member decided to explore a few sites of archaeological importance in and around Kotagiri. (These sites are already known to have few pre-historic remains.)

The scene soon shifted to Konavakarai, a tribal village; home to a rock shelter that has rock paintings of a pre-historic period. But none of the villagers appeared to be familiar with the shelter. Disappointed, we returned to the college. Later that evening, the team discussed the topic of rock art with the students. Suddenly, one of the boys, an Irula, from Karikkiyoor, a village about 40 km from Kotagiri, said he remembered seeing a few such paintings at a site in the forests near Karikkiyoor.

Excitement grew as the team decided that it had to visit the spot the next day:

... we set out for Karikkiyoor passing Solur mattam. The trip along the narrow road with its numerous 'hair pin bends' was breathtaking.

At Alambadi—An X-ray Bull

As soon as we arrived at Karikiyoor, we made enquiries at the village. An elder said he had seen what appeared to be a few paintings while gathering honey. We set out for the site with him acting as guide. It was a trek across 2 km. We finally arrived at a shelter, locally known as Porivarai.

It is a huge rock, roughly 300 feet high and 500 feet long, with paintings found on its eastern face. This site is one of the longest pre-historical rock art sites in Tamil Nadu. The paintings extend over a length of nearly 53 m and go up to a height of 15 m. The shelter could accommodate more than 100 people at a time, with only two narrow entrances. A deep valley lies below the rock, thus making it a safe and secure site.

There are more than 500 images, but the elements have eroded a few. The subjects range from animal to human figures—a series on bulls and bull-fighting, the domestication of wild animals, deer, elephants, domestic fowl, a man riding an animal, a man carrying animals, monkeys, a mongoose and a snake fight, and warriors with weapons.

A Group of Hunters with Weapons

The bulls, and this includes a calf in procession, are a masterpiece. Another interesting depiction is a group of dancers with their arms thrown over the other person's waist.

To Dr Nambiraj, Assistant Archaeologist, Archaeological Society of India (ASI), the symbols, that are noteworthy, include a four-armed one, similar to the ones on punched marked coins. The depiction of plants, a rare subject in rock art context, is unique to this site.

The colours used here are ochre (red hematite) and white (lime), both available locally. (The paints used by pre-historic man were all derived from natural earth pigments, with the painting style adopted being the wet colour technique.)

The pigments have gone straight on the rock surface, with the most commonly used material for preparing pigment in all the style periods

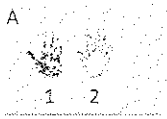
being iron oxide, called *geru* in India. (It was pulverized and mixed with water before being applied to the rock surface. It is also likely that some binding material was used.) At Porivarai, the natural rock wall was not prepared by the pre-historic artists. In rock art, it is characteristic for the artist to choose to execute the work irrespective of the rock curvature or characteristics. At Porivarai, some of the representations are placed so high that they are well beyond the reach of someone standing at floor level. The Porivarai artists may either have clambered on to the wall or used an artificial aid.

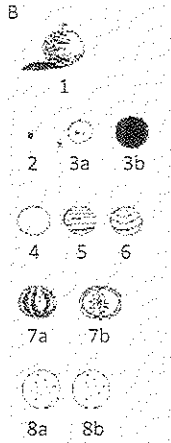
Images of Bulls

At this site, the vast majority of recognizable representations are indeed of various species of animals and human activities. Among the animals most commonly represented are the bison, the bull, and the horse. Most of the representations of humans are crude and clumsy in comparison with the many animal representations. Animals, humans, or signs are shown either in isolation or on panels, which also contain several other animals, humans, or signs. Another characteristic of the Porivarai panels with more than one representation on them is the frequent occurrence of super positioning. It is not at all uncommon to find one animal or sign placed on top of another or sign placed on top of another or sign either overlapping the previous representation in part only or completely covering it. Animals are almost invariably shown in profile and the varieties of stances to be found in this art are numerous. Also some images are painted with solid colours in red and white pigments; treatments believed to belong to an earlier period.

The foot soldiers are armed mainly with swords and shields. The horses are draped in a fancy saddle, blankets, reins, tassels, and other ornaments. Of course it is not possible to say whether there is any mythological background to these war scenes or whether they are merely a reflex icon of warfare as the artist had seen it. The detailed depictions of weapons show that the rock shelter painters were more than casually acquainted with them.

It is possible that members of tribes were recruited into the royal armies and became acquainted with courtly dress and ornaments. In a few of the warrior scenes, the soldiers are standing on one base line that may indicate that they were war scenes taking place in the plains and that may have been witnessed and recorded by the artist. The depictions of the bow are also varied.





Man has always attempted to express what he has seen, a process that has created an impression in his mind. The desire to express these ideas has taken the form of art.

A) The first stage:

1. Impression or print: We dip our hands in some type of a dye, and the impression is made on a surface.
2. Line drawing: The hand is placed on a surface and the outline is drawn with the help of a pencil.

B) Drawing what is seen:

1. The basic principle for any drawing is the outline which we see and the three dimensional effect we feel.
2. A fruit which we actually see, is expressed in the form of a dot. It is clear to the person who has drawn but not to others.

3a. When about to draw, the total area is called 'X'. When we draw a circle, its inner space is X1. In order to make the circle more prominent, we made the line darker and broader yet the drawing is not complete.

3b. Hence we darken the circle completely to make it more prominent.

4. The outer line of the fruit.
5. The outer line of the fruit is filled with parallel lines, in order to impart a 3-D effect, yet that effect gives only a two dimensional effect - flat.
6. The same parallel lines are drawn in a curved form which gives a better 3-D effect.

7a, 7b. The inner and outer part of the fruit is drawn in a clear way.

8a, 8b. The outer and inner part of the fruit are drawn but the expression of it is clear to the person who has drawn it and not to the person who sees it. This happens because the picture is not clear, i.e. only the dots are there and the meaning is not in the mind of the person who draws it.

C) An X-ray impression of a pre-historica image of a cow at the Alambadi site

1. The outline and the expression of the cow are considered as the three-dimensional expression of the picture.
2. A clear outline and the digestive system of the cow are clearly visible in the x-ray picture (image at Alambadi – pre-historic rock painting).

3a, 3b. Both x-ray pictures are the expression of the same picture in different presentation of the cow.

'X-ray expressions' of pre-historic art

Images of Bulls and the Outline of a Lizard can be Made Out

The depiction of the skeleton and intestines of living animals is a widely diffused phenomenon in the art of hunting and gathering societies. Even in the earliest paintings, depictions in the X-ray style are plentiful (see box on 'X-ray expressions of pre-historic art'). The style is obviously not uniform. But uniformity is lacking even between animal depictions within the same painting group. Such X-ray style bull images are depicted in Porivarai. Similar style paintings are found mostly in central Indian rock art shelters. In Tamil Nadu, such images are found in Alambadi, Vellarikombai, and Odiyathoor. According to Chandrasekaran, such art shows the development of the artistic evolution of mankind.

The depiction of the lizard in art is an ancient practice too, depicted at Porivarai in a realistic manner. However, while the purpose of its depiction is not known, it may have originated from religious/mythical practice.

In general, rock art is found in or on a rock shelter or cave or dolman slabs. Such rock art shelters may have been used by early man as habitational sites or as a place for rest during their work in their forest.

Celebration after a boar hunt

To Aravazhi, Archaeology Technical Assistant, ASI, 'the painted shelter at Porivarai may have been used when early man was engaged in hunting or honey gathering. Even now the local people collect honey from high places in the cave using a creeper ladder. Neolithic stone tools and megalithic pottery pieces can also be found. The paintings seem to have been painted by different artist in different periods.'

Pre-historic art gives information on pre-historic social activities, the economy, material culture, idealogy and environmental context, which is often not reflected in other types of archaeological evidence. The general chronological distribution of art in the human evolutionary sequence is highly patterned; that is evidence for art, only occurs in the last 40,000 years or so.

Tamil Nadu still retains the status of 'terra incognito' in the field of rock art research. Except for a few articles in English (K.V. Raman and K. Rajan) and small monographs on rock art by the Madras museum, there is really no other publication on rock art. Raj Poundurai's book in Tamil has very basic information, while a book on rock art in Dharmapuri district, recently published by Mathivanan and Duraisamy, deals with the comparison of rock art symbols with Indus scripts. Further, identification and the list of reported rock art sites are obscure archaeological departments do not have sufficient data or photo documentation of rock art in Tamil Nadu. In the museum publication, the author mentions 500 rock art sites in Tamil Nadu, which are unaccounted for.

So far, about 100 sites have been reported in Tamil Nadu; they are in Dharmapuri (70), Vellore (25), Villupuram (8), the Nilgiris (10), Coimbatore (3), Madurai (3), Dindigal (1), and Theni (2) districts.

More wait to be discovered.

(*The Hindu*, 7 March 2004)

Dalit Identity
*Shades of Approval**

Stalin Rajangam

We need to now move beyond the contemporary debates on Dalit identity and focus on the reception of such an identity. It includes the impact that Dalit identity has had on non-Dalits from the 1990s and the way the non-Dalits engaged with it. The political discourse which focused on the parliamentary activities, started accommodating aspects of society and culture with the emergence of Dalit identity politics. Though the term 'Dalit' had been circulating in the field of scholarship,

* Original title *Dalit Adayalam: Ankikarathin Nirangal.*

it was only recently that it gained its real semantic potential. Therefore, literature, art, and politics were all considered as part of Dalit politics. This discourse has found a place in the academia. It shows that the activities taking place in the Tamil cultural sphere continue to be only a response to the Dalit uprising.

Histories, poems, and novels written during this period share a common Dalit identity politics. Rebellious and counter-cultural aspects were regarded as the fundamentals of such writings. It was Dalit critiques of culture and society rather than their creative outputs that created a tremor through the public sphere. The Dalit critique attempts to re-read canonical texts and foreground radical ideas of aesthetics. Dalit cultural festivals, stressing the uniqueness of Dalit music, Dalit theatre, were conducted in a grand manner as part of this uprising. Attacks on this kind of identity politics, which necessitate these activities, came not just from the right-wing but also from the left. Their anti-Dalit stance changed due to the continuous and consistent struggles that emphasized Dalit identity politics.

Today we need to start from the impact of the Dalit political movement and Dalit history which foregrounded the singularity of Dalit identity. The attacks on Dalits by the non-Brahmin dominant castes testify to this. Dalit critique has shown how it became possible for these forces to remain pro-Dalit and at the same time preserve their own caste identity. New strategies to meet these challenges were also evolved. To understand these, we need to remember the Dalit uprising of the 1990s.

Though this uprising erupted as part of the centenary celebrations of Ambedkar, we need to ask how far the intellectual climate of that time absorbed his thoughts. Because the ideas found in the pro-Dalit writings of the 1990s in Tamil Nadu seem to have grown mostly out of the readings of Western concepts and theories of marginality. Scholars came forward to explain Dalit identity through the glass of the anti-Brahmin politics and counter cultural practices.Though it is the non-Brahmins who attack Dalits most ferociously in the public sphere, the two are seen to constitute a single group Those who prefer to question have no place in the intellectual climate. A turn to the history of Dalit struggles and the existing power relations among various castes may shatter the notion of Dalit identity as well as the non-Brahmin ideology. This was the result of the singularity of the 'Dalit' propounded within the Dalit critique in the closing years of the 1990s. On seeing the explanations given to the Dalit identity becoming invalid, intellectuals cease all discussions of

the Dalit question. Instead of addressing the contradictions in identity politics, the non-Brahmins demand total surrender to the anti-Brahmin movement from the Dalits.This is in fact in opposition to Dalit identity politics. Those who want to revive the discussions on the Dalit question do not want to acknowledge the earlier debates and their impact. In addition, those involved in that debate are consciously neglected.

Next, we can talk of the way Dalit identity was received in spheres other than politics. In response to the protests launched by the Dalits through political consolidation and their demands, many dominant castes started mobilizing in the name of caste. The already mobilized caste groups strengthened their organizations. A few others launched demonstrations against Dalits. Such anti-democratic demonstration was direct and open. The reasons for their contest were made explicit but the reactions found in the cultural sphere were not direct, but subtle. They get their expression in media, art, and literature. The perception of Dalit literature as a literature on caste led to the production of a class of literature justifying caste. To reinvent caste, non-Brahmin writers have turned to their regional past to revive dialect and the folk idiom which are anti-Dalit. The stress on caste identity has only intensified.

The Dalit cultural festival, which was conducted first in Pondicherry, Neyveli, and in Madurai, became an annual event. The non-Dalits who participated and performed in the festivals started investigating their own identities. Some of their creations presented a mixture: Dalit politics and their own caste interest. Films like *Solla Maranda Kathai*, *Thendral*, *Onbadu Rupa Nottu*, produced by director Thangar Bachan, are examples for this. A few (like Kavya publications) have started journals and publishing houses to secure recognition for their castes in the intellectual domain. Such publications, which showed interest in Dalit literature, have now started publishing materials on their own caste. In the context of the recovery of Dalit identity and their intellectual history, some writers attempted to recover their own caste indentity: non-Brahmin, non-Dalit as it may be and compare it with Dalit intellectuals and personalities with a view to highlighting the difference. They cannot however be criticized as being casteist while they record Dalit identity politics they do so alongside the history of other castes. Hence they have assembled a resistance to the accusation that they are casteist. This may seem to be a democratic move as it tries to give equal treatment to the oppressor as well as the oppressed. But we cannot call it so. The social justice discourse of the non-Brahmin movement comes in handy for the recovery of the history of 'oppression' of these castes along with Dalit

oppression. The poem, 'Pangaligal Pagayaligalaaga' (one-time cousins are now enemies) by Pazhamalai appeared in the journal *Vallinam*, is an example of this. That is why criticism on this trend creates tension.

The representation of the 'rural' in Tamil cinema also shows such an impact. Had the recently released movies with the folk theme been produced in the past, they would have been radically different. Today there is a considerable impact of Dalit identity politics on the lyrics, characterization, and music. However, in movies of directors Amir, Balaji Sakthivel, and Bala, such as *Paruthi Veeran* and *Subramaniapuram*, we can see the impact of Dalit cultural festivals. We can see here a new trend: Dalit characters carry their identity when they appear in isolated situations and caste differences are carefully avoided, contradictions are silenced when they appear alongside others.

We must also talk of the documentaries, which moved from a discussion of Dalit issues to a discussion of one's own caste in the name of liberation-struggles and Tamil identity. The documentaries, *Kaalam* and *Regai*, produced by Dheenadayalan are some examples for this trend.

The above-mentioned trends testify not just the impact of Dalit identity politics but also the ways and means of engaging with it. Our argument is that these seemingly caste-free representations suggest only a caste ideology. By recognizing Dalit politics they bypass the questions posed by it and gain the possibility of preserving their own caste. They would also prefer to stand by their caste in moments of crisis and during caste clashes, thereby making the Dalit identity a caste identity.

Apart from these, the non-Brahmin non-Dalit castes find a new way of retaining their power. This could be seen in the community of Tamil writers organized by the representatives from Vanniyar caste, in which social activists and intellectuals of different castes participated. This is how the reconstruction of caste identity received democratic approval. Aptly the participants also did not bother to question its stress on caste. Dalit intellectuals also participated in this meeting. The existing socio-political climate was made to serve their goals. Such activities seek to gain a democratic face for these groups as a reward for 'recognizing' Dalit identity.

This may remind us of the political climate that existed in the 1910s and 1920s. The Justice Party and the Non-Brahmin Association safeguarded their position by making the Dalit leaders participate in their meetings. All these years Dalit leaders were aware of the function of such activities at the cultural and political spheres. It is important today to understand these responses to Dalit identity politics. Only then

might we avoid blaming the Dalits for the present-day dip in ideological fervour in their politics. Those who are concerned will support the Dalit movement only if it fits with *their* notion of what it should be. In a sense, it is a Gandhian framework. These responses showed that activists in Tamil Nadu wanted to engage with the Dalit question only from a Gandhian framework. Instead, what is needed today is the recognition of the singularity of Dalits.

—Translated by R. Azhagarasan

Power that Transcends
*Physical Body—Societal Body—Dalit Body**

S. Thenmozhi

Preface

We can say, that virtually all our present-day problems are, in some sense, problems relating to power. Power shapes us, pervading all aspects of life. The view that power issues from a centre, is now being challenged. We have come to the understanding today that there can be no condition free from power. There arises the question, what could be the meaning of terms such as 'liberation' and 'freedom'. All that is possible today is to just alter the power equations, those philosophies that conceived of a state free of power, are losing their currency. This is a matter to be taken into account by all those who have been oppressed and suppressed. In whatever way other groups who fight against power understand this truth, in the Indian context those who are constructed as subjects within caste ideology, especially those identified as a Dalit and a woman in society, must approach this issue with great care.

Various Forms of Power

The evolution and expansion of power happen under various conditions. Similarly, protests against it also find innumerable manifestations. For the sake of convenience, we can classify all such struggles under three heads:

* Original title *Kadanthu Sellum Athikaram: Udal-Samuka Udal-Dalit Udal.*

1. Struggles against hegemony
2. Struggles against economic exploitation
3. Struggles against constructions of individuals as subjects

We can thus broadly categorize the struggles as given below.

1. Struggles against Hegemony

Man stands divided, based on race, religion, and language. We cannot say that these divisions are what men have created for themselves out of their own wish. In the history of mankind, at various changing stages, people have had no choice but be burdened by such insignia. Such identities, created by man at one point of time for one's defence, have later become a burden and a manacle for him. In the beginning he utilized such identities. Alas! Later on, the identities have started using him. Be it linguistic identity, racial identity, or religious identity, man no more possesses the power to control them. He has been rendered a prisoner of such identities.

A social organization, which has tasted power by accepting an identity stemming from considerations of solidarity and security, tends to turn that very identity into its own instrument of domination. It tries to dominate another social group which has adopted another identity. We can discern all through the course of history how this power struggle has led to bloodshed, on many an occasion manifested as fierce battles. We know how in such battles, it has been the fate of the defeated social groups to toil as slaves. Mankind has been cursed to counter this domination obtained through identities, in the very same manner. Therefore, communities which strive to deliver themselves from bondage, have been subjected to registering their opposition by affirming their identities. If we look at recent history, we will be able to perceive that for four decades and more, only battles against identity-based domination have been conducted. Such struggles, designated in political parlance as national and ethnic liberation struggles, became prominent, particularly in Africa and Asian countries.

2. Struggles against Economic Exploitation

We may regard these struggles as resistances to the forms of exploitation which alienate an individual from the objects he produces. Although in history several thinkers have recommended a host of prescriptions

for eliminating economic inequities, it is Karl Marx's (1818–1883) ideology which has had a profound impact. We have seen in history how in Russia, in East European countries, in China, and in Vietnam, such revolts have been set in motion. Believing that power lay in the government, this ideology held that by capturing the government, we can capture power. It also drew attention to how forces of production and production relationships are inextricably woven into power. By explaining that profit is nothing but swindling the surplus value, it pointed out how capitalism has rendered all relationships exploitative, founded on profit motive. We can include under this category the countless revolts staged in the light of this philosophy.

3. Struggles against Construction of Individuals as Subjects

We must distinguish between subjectivity and identity. It is ideology which constructs an individual into a subject. Subjectivity has a far deeper connotation than identity. It is worth examining, how an individual who falls within the ambit of ideology, is shaped as a subject. It is a fight against those forms with which an individual is bound and compelled to obey others in the same mode. These struggles are very subtle. They are more violent than even the other two revolts.

* * *

When a physical body is transformed into a societal body, it is not just enough to keep it under check in the interests of the community, but must also be involved in production. It should function at two stages: production for the group's subsistence and reproduction for the group's expansion. Framing the rules and regulations for the functioning of the social group has become unavoidable, given the fact that the ideological subtleties relating to the two stages must be discerned. In order to compel the members of the group to follow the regulations, importance was bestowed upon them. It is there that the conception of 'sanctity' rears its head.

Three Traditional Formulae to Control the Societal Body

We have to give importance to three texts, among the many, which have been produced to control the behaviour of the members of the

concerned groups in Hindu society. They represent the fundamental codes of Hindu society which demarcated the three significant aims of life. Termed *purusha* and *artha*, they have embraced all the aspects of the Hindu way of life. The three traditional formulae are: (1) Dharma, (2) Artha, and (3) Kama.

1. Dharma

Dharma is a concept which contains within itself several dimensions such as duty, religion, services related to religion, moral obligations, religion related conventions, laws, codes of conduct. '*dr*', the root of the word 'Dharma', means to hold, to protect. Dharma is invoked not only to explain how society functions, but is also so conceptualized as to codify how it should function. We can consider Dharmasutras as ancient texts which have set forth this. It is believed that these texts must have been constructed during the period between the third century BC and AD first century. 'Dharmasastras' were those which came into vogue subsequent to this. Among the Dharmasastras the prominent one is *Manusastra*. Believed to have been made in the first century AD, *Manusastra*, through its 2,685 verses, offers views on body-related matters, as well as politics, law, justice, caste, and so on. Not only that, it also sets forth ideas on purity, pollution, ways and means of obtaining material wealth, and the methods of maintaining it. Until recently, it is *Manusastra* which has been the foundational principle of various governments. It is an indisputable fact that we have not been completely set free from its influence, even in the present time when we have accepted a different form of governance.

2. Artha

Artha carries various connotations such as wealth, political power, and success. The work *Arthasastra*, said to have been authored by Kautilya, a minister in Chandragupta Maurya's court, is considered to be the foundational text for this. Although it is claimed that this book has laid down the basic principles of how a king must rule, it says more about the psychology of human beings and how a king can handle it to suit his purpose. How a king can capitalize in myriad ways the faith in god among the people, is also discussed here. This work suggests how a king should go in a royal procession in the company of those dressed up

as gods; how to make the people believe that the king has the power of prophecy, by pretending to predict the moment of death of some and thereby finishing them. This book elaborates how, in multifarious ways, those in power can reap rewards by stratagems such as spreading falsehood and dispersing rumours.

3. Kama

Kama does not refer to desire related to sexuality alone. Although this term does denote pleasure and desire, it is employed in such a way as to include all sensory enjoyments. This term embraces music, painting, cuisine, and all such fine arts. The man who composed the sutra for this is Vatsayayana, who is considered to belong to the AD third century. Although this book spells out the duties which individuals must observe, it is also possible to view them as applicable to society.

Hindu society has construed the three aspects, mentioned above, only as intertwined with one another. Its approach implies that we cannot deny the one and privilege the other. If this has been the state of Hindu society, there are historical evidences to show that the same techniques have been adopted by Western societies too. This has been clarified by Michel Foucault (1926–1984) who unravelled this in his *History of Sexuality*. In the seventeenth century, power over human existence took shape in two kinds of fundamental forms. The first basic form, constructing the body as a machine which must be regulated and from it must be extracted its maximum potential, controls the body by means of confining it within the economic structure. The second one approaches the body, taking into account the biological determiners and rules. Michel Foucault, who mentions how management of birth and death, domains such as health and medicine, were organized in consonance with this, explains how the old dispensation, which held as its basis the power to kill, happened to change into one which kept as its basis of surveillance. That this cultural transformation which is said to have taken place in Western societies a few centuries before, has happened roughly about 2,000 years ago in India, is precisely what our history reveals to us.

The Socially-constructed Female Body

Perhaps time allowed Eve to touch the apple only to teach that the seeds of liberation were lying in waiting to sprout from inside the receptacle

that the body is. God too, who was the instrument in goading Eve's brain to pluck the apple, thereby constituting the world's first instance of alternative thinking, must have felt a yearning for liberation. The instance of patriarchy being identified as the *sutradari* who stripped the matrilineal society of its prowess and authority, became both the glory and the shame of history. Force has been focused on food by nature in the formula of the food chain. Nature, which has armed itself with creation and destruction incarnates itself as mother, by bearing upon itself even destruction as a symbol of multiple forms of production. The battle that man and woman and all other living creatures wage for food, for existence, is all determined as part of the hard reality of life. All bodies do not offer any resistance to suitably adapting themselves. Even when time devouring time, time delivered time, the female body prepared itself for adapting and by this alone, till today, it has survived. Or else, it would have long ago been reduced to fossils of bygone destruction.

Although the society, which constructed various kinds of machinery for the purpose of watching over and controlling the body, did so bearing in mind the bodies of both man and woman, it is an irrefutable truth that the attention paid to the female body was a little more. The reason for that was the fear of a woman's body. The female body with its capacity for engendering lives, has been a source of wonder for mankind. When this wonder turned into fear, the violence on the female body started increasing. On account of that, suitable technical subtleties were invented by those wielding authority. In order to enslave woman, ideological propaganda was launched through innumerable texts. Woman too was compelled to believe it and what is more, accept it. On the one hand, society structured her as a deity, and on the other, a slave who can never be free.

Chanakya's sutra has handed to this society the mantra for annihilating the life by destroying the body, and foeticide, if it was female body, by tearing open the stomach and impaling the tiny life on the tip of the sword of perversity, during the invasions of ancient times for the sake of land and woman. The venerated historic fortress walls, all over the country, are built with such genocide. In this, the pathos of female body wandering everywhere confessing its doubly damned status before society is a fact which cannot be denied. Should we undertake a rereading of Taj Mahal we can realize truths quite contrary to love, lurking in its glow, beauty, and its magnificence. Taj Mahal is a symbol of pain. We can understand it as the anguished verbal edifice of a female body, now lying frozen as Mumtaz. That is how rereadings of histories bear out new

truths for us. Greatest histories are wombs of greatest betrayal. Even as it is true that homes and life inside home are a reality, women's bodies, in every home wailing in silent language, are equally a reality. This society has been deceiving woman by adorning the female body with the crown of sacrifice.

Dalit Female Body

We find that the woman's body is being subjected to onslaught of perverse sexuality, class bashing, and casteist abrasions. This violent frenzy increases manifold if it happens to be a Dalit woman's body.

It is our very own Tamil tradition which worshipped femininity by wrapping sanctity around it by hailing woman as:

That fast asleep, dissembling female creative force,
the one with powerful eyesight,
Slim-waisted lass, mother-in-law to the gypsi Valli,
talkative fisherwoman,
Servant at beck and call, sister to the God who reclines
on the snake bed,
Is it this Parachi deified as
Sivakami?

The same Tamil tradition disfigured heaps of superimpositions pertaining to woman, deity and sanctity, and played with it. The above-mentioned song should not be understood in its literal sense. Although it is granted that the composer has employed such a method with a view to just praising Parvati, when it is said that it is mockery that breaks from it and the enjoyment the song rouses are possible only for a mind that has accepted the stigma of caste, then its intention becomes clear. The sad truth of even the sacralized female deity's body being categorized, looking for its caste affiliations, is revealed by the historical background of using the female body as a hostage to caste. Tamil society must hang its head in shame for projecting the female body as an ocean bearing casteist raft, variedly referred to as Idaichi, Kurathi, Valaichi, Puzhukkachi, Parachi.

Those who function with a consciousness of women's rights must bear in mind the special nature of the violent atrocities that are perpetrated on Dalit women. When we look at the statistics released by the national criminal records, we cannot help but notice the quantum leap in the violence perpertrated on Dalit women. Even there, it is the Dalit girls

who are targets of sexual assaults. If we try to examine why it should be so, assaults on Dalit women along economic and ideological lines are the reasons which become evident. In the beginning we examined three kinds of struggles. We also saw how the three kinds of struggles have risen against the three kinds of authoritarian repression. Now the question before us is, what kind of battles should women, especially Dalit women, launch? Caste oppression is something that is connected to subjectivization. At the same time it also paves the way for economic exploitation. Not only that, it also functions as a missile hurled for institutionalized repression stemming from identity.

All women do not experience the same kind of oppression. All do not encounter the same kind of power. There may be similarities among them. Based on that even a temporary solidarity may evolve. Just as the other kinds of differences are pushed to the background when racial oppression gets intensified, the differences between Dalit women and other women may subside while confronting the virulent attacks of patriarchy. But the struggles which the Dalit women have to wage will certainly be different since the power and the oppression they face are very different. This is but inevitable. The struggle against the ouslaught on Dalit women's body generates a compulsion to rewrite history, to annihilate and choke the flow of time. The Dalit women have the duty to give a fitting reply to the base mentality which decimated woman's body by force, by play of perversion, wounded feminine feelings by rejection, humiliation, indifference, and denials. Their uprising should fundamentally be a challenge against domination, against economic deprivation, and be a struggle against power that constructs subjectivity. Dalit women should act as vigilant warriors, as they are placed in a situation where they have to face a very subtle form of oppression. Being absolutely friendless in this battleground, they should take up this struggle with caution, self-consciousness, and intensity. Should they regard this situation not as a curse of history but as a boon, it should not be impossible for them to turn the tables in their favour.

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—Translated by C.T. Indra and Meenakshi Hariharan

Glossary

aasaari	:	an artisan—one of the artisan castes such as carpenter, goldsmith, and blacksmith.
aavaaram	:	tanner's senna—a medicinal tree.
agamaniyakar	:	temple functionary with ritual duties.
Aippasi, Karthigai	:	month of the Tamil calendar (mid-October to mid-November.
akka	:	sister.
anna	:	a denomination of currency during British rule (16 annas made one rupee).
annan	:	elder brother.
appalam	:	fried or roasted wafer made of rice and spices.
Arthasastra	:	a classical work on the science of government and politics by Kautilya.
athaan	:	a woman's paternal aunt's son—often used in the sense of intended husband.
babu	:	a Westernized Indian.
Badrakaali	:	a form of Kali, goddess of retribution, derived from the pantheon of pre-Aryan and folk female deities—also a term for an epithet for an angry woman who inspires awe and terror.
banian	:	a man's undervest.
beedi	:	Indian cigarette made of tobacco wrapped in tendu leaves (*Diospyros melanoxylon*).
Chaaliyar	:	a community of weavers, categorized as Backward Caste.
Chakkili, Chakkiliyar	:	caste of leatherworkers, cobblers deemed 'untouchable' because they skin, cure, and work with animal skins and hides.
chappal	:	slipper, loose footwear.
cheri	:	settlement of 'untouchables' outside the area of caste Hindus in village.
chithappa	:	uncle—father's younger brother, or mother's younger sister's husband.
crore	:	ten million.

crorepati : millionaire.
Deepavali : festival of lights celebrated on the eve of the new moon during the month of *Aippasi* (mid-October to mid-November) in the Tamil calendar.
Dharmasastras : classical Sanskrit texts dealing with law and religion set down in the AD first millennium.
dhobi : washerman—a caste of laundry workers.
dosa, upma : a fermented rice and blackgram pancake, and broken wheat or rice savoury—common 'tiffin' dishes of south India.
ennamma? : why, Amma?
godaanam : ritual gift of cows at a fire sacrifice.
gopuram : temple tower/roof.
hundi : collection box in a temple.
idaichi : shepherdess.
jilla : district.
josyakaarar, josyam : soothsaying, fortune-telling; fortune-teller.
kaavadi : a heavy wooden structure with an arch decorated with peacock feathers, flowers, and other ornaments. In a feat of endurance, devotees of Lord Murugan dance as they carry the kaavadi on their shoulders during the festival of Skanda-sashti.
Kama : god of love.
Karthigai : month of the Tamil calendar, from mid-November to mid-December.
kaththaazhai : aloe reeds.
kolam : decorative patterns in front of houses or on the floor, made using rice flour.
kurathi : gypsy woman.
kuzhambu : thick, tamarind-based gravy with lentils, to be eaten with rice.
lakh/lac : a hundred thousand (100,000).
paasam : affection, love.
lungi : a garment worn by men, consisting of a length of checked or patterned cloth with ends stitched together, tucked around the waist.
a madras measure : a traditional measurement which is 8 ollocks (an ollock may roughly be about 100 g).

Madurai-Veeran's chain : The folk deity Madurai-Veeran of southern Tamil Nadu was probably a warrior in Tirumala Nayaka's army in the seventeenth century. Believed to have been of the cobbler caste, he vanquished the dacoit Sangili ('Chain') Karuppan, but fell out with the king, reportedly because he fell in love with a girl of a higher caste. He was dismembered, and both he and the girl were killed. They are venerated as folk deities. However, in this poem Madurai-Veeran is referred to as a fearsome figure wielding a chain as a weapon and could have been a village guardian of a higher caste other than Dalits.
manai patta : document of ownership.
mantra : a verse, the sound and composition of which are considered to be inspirational.
Manusastra : a text of customary law attributed to the eponymous Manu.
mavaraasi : noble and blessed queen ('maharaji')—a colloquially used description, extravagant praise.
mlechcha : term of opprobrium for a foreigner, meaning non-Vedic, unclean, and ignoble.
Moodevi : An inauspicious female deity, said to bring bad luck and misery.
munsif : village revenue official.
muraippenn : intended bride, often the man's maternal uncle's daughter, or his paternal aunt's daughter.
murungai : drumstick tree.
Naicker : an upper caste community.
OT : short form of 'over time', meaning extra hours worked.
paavaadai : traditional anklet-length skirt worn by young girls.
panchayat : village council of five or more elders.
pandakkaal : pre-nuptial ceremony in which the poles of the wedding-tent or pandal are ritually erected.
pandal : a shelter with a thatched or coloured cloth roof erected to conduct a wedding, a mourning, or other social or religious functions.

Panguni : last month of the Tamil calendar (mid-March to mid-April).

parachi : woman of the Paraiya caste—a term of contempt for a woman of an 'untouchable' Paraya caste.

Paraiya, Paraiyar : a people believed to have been the original Tamils, an agricultural community that was reduced to bondage in early medieval times and relegated to 'untouchable' hamlets outside the village. They came to be known as Parayas, due to their association with the drum (*parai*), beaten at village festivities, death ceremonies, etc. Iyothee Thass looks at the word, 'parai', as a verb referring to the act of verbal propagation of the teachings of Buddha. Historically, it is worth noting that the word 'paraya' was first used by European traders, visitors, and missionaries, leading to a freezing of the term and its disparaging meaning, referring to 'outcastes'. For more information on the movement against the thrust of menial labour on Dalits including the beating of drums, led by Elayaperumal, refer to his autobiography *Cittirai Neruppu* [The Heat of Summer] (1998).

pathinettaam : the eighteenth day of the Tamil month of *Aadi*,

patta : title deed to land.

periamma : mother's elder sister.

perukku when married women undertake special pujas.

pey : a possessed girl.

Pongal : a harvest festival celebrated on the first of the month of Thai (mid-January to mid-February).

Ponnuruvi saami : goddess named after the wife of Karna, in the Mahabharata.

pooja, puja, pujai, poojai, poosai, pusai : adoration of deities with ritual observances such as lighting of the lamp, offering flowers, etc.

poriyal : dish of vegetables.

poromboke : commons, land belonging to the government; also a term of abuse, meaning one who belongs to nobody and is uncared for.

pottai tank : a pond with unusable water and is commonly referred as 'pottai tank'. The water becomes unusable not because it was dirty, but because of the corpse (of the 'untouchable' girl, 'Ponnuruvi', who later becomes a spirit in the story) found in the tank.

pungai : Indian beechnut tree, *Pongamia pinnata*.

puzhukkachchi : a contemptuous term for a menial servant woman or slave, derived from *puzhukkai*, which means dung.

rudra thandavam : Shiva's sacred dance of destruction.

sabha : club, association.

sambar, rasam : two common lentil-and-tamarind dishes to mix with rice.

Samidurai Padayachi : another name for Vanniyar caste.

saniyan : devil—a common curse.

sanyasi : an ascetic.

saranaagati : a state of surrender at the feet of god.

Sivakami : consort of Lord Nataraja at Chidambaram—Parvati—who 'belongs' to the high caste Hindus, who kept the 'untouchables' out of that shrine for centuries

soolam (trisulam) : trident associated with the goddess Mariamman.

sutra : verse dictum or axiom.

sutradari : manipulator, one who pulls the string (sutra in Sanskrit also means string).

tahsildar : revenue officer of a taluk (subdivision of a district).

taluk : subdivision of a district.

Tamilagam : the Tamil homeland—Tamil Nadu.

thaali (taali) : a thread tied by the groom around the bride's neck during the wedding ritual signifying the pledge and bond of marriage.

thaavani : a 'half-saree', cloth half the length of a saree, tucked in at the waist and draped across the bosom, traditionally worn by nubile girls in south India.

Thai : month of the Tamil calendar from mid-January to mid-February.

thalayari : a village functionary attached to the village revenue officer.

thanukan	:	refers to whirling nut tree wood (*Murraya exotica*).
thappu	:	a small tom-tom.
tharai	:	a musical instrument used during the festive occasions.
thatha	:	grandfather, any elderly man.
themmangu	:	a folk ditty.
thinnai	:	masonry platform in traditional houses, usually for sitting or lying on, and sometimes used as a work surface.
thoratti	:	rake with a long handle and a crook at one end.
thurinju	:	citron lemon.
Uthiram	:	star considered auspicious for marrying couples.
valaichi	:	fisherwoman.
vettiyaan	:	cremation-ground worker, deemed to be a polluting caste.

Notes on Authors

(Pundit) Iyothee Thass (1845–1914), Siddha medical practioner and a scholar in Tamil, Sanskrit, Pali, and English, through his historically informed and methodologically convincing reading of ancient Tamil texts and cultural practices, historicized the birth of the notion of 'untouchability' in Tamil Nadu and traced a 'Tamil Buddhism'. Among the books that did this are *Buddharadu Aathivedam*, *Indirar Desa Sarithiram*, and *Vesha Brahmana Vivaram*. He convinced the president of the Theosophical Society, Henry Steel Olcott, who organized the initiation of 'untouchables' into Buddhism through the Bikhu Sumangala Nayake in Ceylon (Sri Lanka). He then established the Sakya Buddhist Society in Chennai and promoted his ideas through the magazine *Tamizhan* (1907–14). He demanded that the colonial government register the 'untouchables' as 'casteless Dravidians' in the first Census conducted in the late nineteenth century. Iyothee Thass established the Advaidananda Sabha in 1876 and Dravida Mahajana Sabha in 1891.

Rettamalai Srinivasan (1859–1945), formed the Adi Dravida Mahajana Sabha in 1891 and organized the first conference of 'untouchables' on 23 December 1893 and the next on 7 October 1895. After his education in Coimbatore, he served in a hill station in the Nilgiris, where he met Colonel Olcott in 1890. He ran the magazine *Parayan* between 1893 and 1899. He served as a translator in South African courts in 1904 and was associated with Gandhi till 1920. After his return, he worked closely with Ambedkar and was nominated as a representative of the Depressed Classes in the Madras Legislative Council in 1923 and for the Second Round Table Conferences held during 1930–2 in London. Despite being a great supporter of Ambedkar (in his demand for separate electorates), Srinivasan had to convince him to sign the Poona Pact to save Gandhi who went on a fast-unto-death against the communal award. He disagreed with Ambedkar's decision on conversion.

M.C. Rajah (1883–1943), author of the famous book, *The Oppressed Hindus*, was the Honorary Secretary of the All India Adi Dravida Mahajana Sabha in 1928. Besides conducting conferences of Depressed Classes both at the provincial and district levels, he led the deputation of the Depressed Classes before Lord Chelmsford, the then Viceroy and Governor General of India, in 1923, before Lord Willington, the Governor of Madras, and in 1923, before Lord Reading, the then Viceroy and Governor General of India, in 1925, before Lord Goschen, the Governor of Madras, and in 1929, before Lord Irwin, the Viceroy and Governor General of India. He founded a free hostel for students from the Depressed Classes. He served on various committees under colonial rule including the Secondary Education Reorganization Committee, Public Services Communal Representation Committee, and Madras Widows Home Committee. He was also appointed as honorary magistrate and nominated to the Provincial Council, the Madras Legislative Council, and the Indian Central Committee. He was a prominent member of the Justice Party from its inception. In 1929, he was elected as the Deputy Leader of the South Indian Labour Front. He played a leading role in establishing the Scouts Movement in Madras. He was also nominated by H.E. Lord Willington to the Senate of Madras University in 1924.

Swami Sahajananda (1890–1959), disillusioned with the discriminatory practices of the American Arcot Mission School and the discrimination among the sadhus in the Karapathira Swamigal ashram, became a renunciate and established an educational trust for 'untouchables' in the name of the famous Saivite saint Nandanar at Omakkulam, near Chidambaram, where he was said to have attained nirvana. Gandhi visited the school twice (in 1926 and 1934). He was a syndicate member of Annamalai University, served twice in the Madras Legislative Council, and thrice as a Congress Party MLA. Despite being a staunch Gandhian, he strongly supported Ambedkar's demand for a separate electorate. He protested against the closure of Adi Dravida schools, conducted the temple entry movement in Chidambaram, and ran a fortnightly magazine called *Paranjothi*.

Meenambal Sivaraj (1904–1992), popularly known as 'Annai Meenambal Sivaraj', was the granddaughter of the famous philanthropist, Madurai Pillai, and wife of the President of the All India SC/ST Federation, Sivaraj. She was one of the few women who actively participated in the anti-Hindi agitation in 1938. Well versed in Tamil, Telugu, and English, Meenambal served as the Deputy President of Adi Dravida Mahajana Sabha and Adi Andhra Movement. In 1937, she conducted the conference of the Adi Dravidas in Tirunelveli, Coimbatore, and in the Nilgiris in 1945. She served as Deputy Mayor and Magistrate of Madras. It was she who honoured the Dravidian ideologue E.V. Ramasamy with the title, 'Periyar', at a Women's Conference that she organized in Chennai in 1932.

Veerammal (1924–2006), a social worker, was known for establishing the famous 'Annai Ashram' for the aged and orphans. Her schooling was supported by the Harijana Seva Sangh, after which she worked in All India Radio as a staff artiste. She participated actively in the nationalist and Dravidian movement. Inspired by her brother Veerasamy and her meeting with Ambedkar in 1940, she established the Adi Dravida Welfare School near Tiruchy in 1943. With Periyar's wife, Nagammai, she established a hostel for women but later parted ways because of Periyar's refusal to condemn the non-partisan role of the then Congress government over the issue of the 'Mudukulathur riot' in 1957. She established the Tamil Nadu Women's Welfare Association in 1954 with nineteen branches and Tamil Nadu Scheduled Caste Welfare Association. She also led the anti-liquor movement in Tamil Nadu.

L. Elayaperumal (1924–2005) initiated struggles demanding education for the 'untouchables' and fought for the elimination of jobs imposed on them like drum beating, removing animal carcasses, and work at cremation sites. After the death of Swami Sahajananda, he took charge of the Nadanar Educational Society He became a Member of the first Lok Sabha in 1952 representing Congress, but he left in 1970 when Congress refused to protest against the opening of liquor shops. Besides getting elected thrice as MP and once as MLA after uniting with the Congress, he also became the State Congress President in 1979. He quit the party again and floated the Indian Human Rights Party and reunited with the Congress in 2003. As the chairman of the first ever National Commission to enquire into the socio-economic condition of the 'untouchables', he suggested separate settlements for them and reservations for SCs in the administrative and police services.

T.P. KAMALANATHAN (1923–2007) was the son of A.P. Periyasamy Pulavar—a close associate of Iyothee Thass, who conducted 32 Self-Respect Conferences in Tirupattur and helped revive Buddhism in the 1920s and 1930s. Kamalanathan served as a sub-inspector in Tamil Nadu police till his retirement in 1983. He preserved the sources relating to the Dalits' struggle for emancipation, which included the pamphlets issued, petitions submitted, proceedings of the conferences conducted by the Depressed Classes, and some of the rare books and leaflets on Dalit history. He revived the South India Sakiya Buddhist Association and published some of these sources. He also published a rebuttal to the Dravidian ideologue K. Veeramani, who claimed in an article in the *Dalit Voice* (1–15 January 1984) that the Dravidian movement alone was responsible 'for the present advancement of Dalits'.

ANBU PONNOVIAM (1923–2003) practised Buddhism, to which he was introduced by his merchant grandfather. He was instrumental in bringing out the writings of Iyothee Thass that appeared in *Tamizhan* in three volumes through the scholar, Aloysius. He secured a degree in Fine Arts, joined as a writer in the Archeology Department in 1949, and became its Director in 1951. He got the opportunity to explain the cultural artefacts in the museum to Ambedkar during his visit to Madras. He founded the Ambedkar Memorial Hockey team in 1962 and worked closely with Ambedkar's son, Yeswanth Rao, who worked in the same department in Delhi and was part of the team of research archeologists, who visited the Commonwealth countries. After his retirement in 1983, he served in an American research institute that worked on the antiquity of Indian culture.

RAJ GAUTHAMAN (1950–) is retired professor of Tamil and is known for his critical writings, *Dalit Panpaadu* (1994) and *Dalit Paarvaiyil Tamil Panpaadu* (1995). He is also known as a Marxist critic in the 1980s, and turned towards Dalit critique in the 1990s. He has produced more than 15 books on classical and modern Tamil literature and has written three volumes of autobiography—*Siluvairaj Carithiram*, *Kalachumai*, and *Londanil Siluvairaj*.

INDRAN (1948–) is a poet, translator, critic, and documentary maker and has contributed significantly to the field of Tamil aesthetics with writings on literature, arts, and cultural practices including cinema. He has studied the Indian artefacts in the British Museum, the history of Cholamandalam artists in colonial Tamil Nadu, and has conducted exhibitions of painters and sculptors in Tamil Nadu for the Lalit Kala Akademi and for the Government of Tamil Nadu. He has published more than 20 books, which includes eight collections of poetry and translations. Besides being a member of the Sahitya Akademi, he has also served on the editorial boards of literary magazines like *Velicham*, *The Living Art*, and *Nun Kalai* and produced documentaries—*The Sculptural Energy* and *A Dialogue with Painting*.

G. CHANDRASEKARAN (1959–), popularly known as 'Chandru', has written short stories and essays in the popular media both in English and Tamil and is widely known for his modern paintings. He served as Art Tutor in HWA Association and Lecturer in Nanyang Academy. He has orchestrated performances and sculpted installations at universities, and art festivals in Singapore, Australia, Japan, Indonesia, and the Philippines. He received the Young Artists Award in 1993 and was selected for the First Asia-Pacific Triennial, Queensland Art Gallery. He retired as Principal of the Fine Arts College, Madras.

P. MATHIYALAGAN (1950–) is a poet who retired as Chief Telephone Supervisor from the Indian Telephone Industries Limited, and served in the Pondicherry unit of the Democratic Youth Forum and People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL). He associated himself with the 'Third Theatre', involved in the production of street plays on nuclear disaster and science for non-scientists through the Literacy Movement and participated in the activities of the Progressive Writers' Forum, Makkal Kalvi Iyakkam, and Dalit Panpaattu Peravai.

IMAYAM alias V. Annamalai (1967–) has published three novels—*Koveru Kaluthakal* (1994), *Aarumugam* (1999), and *Sedal* (2006)—and two short-story collections titled *Manparam* (2004) and *Video Mariamman* (2008). Of these, his much acclaimed first novel, *Koveru Kaluthakal*, won the award from Agni Aksara Trust, Tamil Nadu Progressive Writers' Forum in 1994, and Amudhan Adigal Ilakkiya Award for Literature in 1998. The English translation of this novel appeared as *Beasts of Burden* in 2001 and the second one appeared in 2006. He was awarded a Junior Research Fellowship from the Department of Culture, Government of India. He was also honoured with a State award. He is a schoolteacher.

Stalin Rajangam (1980–) is researcher working on his PhD, and has published five collections of essays, including *Jananayagamatra Jananayagam* (2007), *Theentappadada Noolkal* (2007). He has edited the book, *Buddhar Arul Aram* (2008) by G. Appadurayar (the contemporary of Iyothee Thass), and the correspondence between Iyothee Thass and Singaravelar. He has also published three monographs on Dalit activists in Tamil Nadu and is currently editing the book, *The Villupuram Riot*. He teaches Tamil in American College, Maduari.

Azhakiya Periyavan alias C. Aravindan (1967–) is a poet, short-story writer, and novelist. His first significant short-story collection, *Theetu*, appeared in 2000. He has published one novel, *Thagappan Kodi* (2001), four short-story collections, and two poetry collections, *Nee Nikalthana Podhu* (2000) and *Arubha Nanju* (2005). He received awards from Tirupur Tamil Sangam, P.M. Subramaniam Endowment Trust, and from the Tamil Nadu Government in 2003. He served in a non-governmental organization (NGO) for eight years before he became a teacher.

J.P. Sanakya (1973–) is a short-story writer who has published two collections—*En Veettin Varaipadam* (2002) and *Kanavu Putthakam* (2009). He studied Carnatic Music in Chidambaram Natarajar temple and Tamil Isai (music) at Annamalai University. He has been working as an Assistant Director in the Tamil film industry for more than a decade.

S. Thenmozhi (1974–) is a poet and short-story writer, and her poetry collections appeared as *Thuravi Nandu* in 2008 and short stories as *Nerkkunjam* in 2009. She is a postgraduate in both Chemistry and History and hails from Tiruvarur. After working in the Forensic Department, she is presently serving as Assistant Commissioner in the Commercial Tax Department. She played a key role in establishing a literary forum called Ilakkiya Cholai in the Thanjavur region. Her compilation of the writings of transgenders appeared as *Maadavappilai*. She is currently doing her PhD in the art and history of Kalabhras in Thanjavur Tamil University.

N.D. Rajkumar (1966–), born to a family which practises tantra and the art of *marmam*, he is known for his powerful use of folk idiom and for the retelling of myths and legends in his poetry. He has published five collections of poetry—*Odakku* (1999), *Theri* (1997), *Ratha Santhna Paavai* (2001), *Kaattalan* (2003), and *Sottu Sottai Uthirum Pookkal* (2007). A collection of his poetry selected by Ravikumar titled *Kal Vilakkukal* appeared in 2004. He has translated the poetry of A. Iyyappan and Pavithiran Theekkunni from Malayalam into Tamil. He also has released a CD of the songs he has composed. He has been a member of the Secretary of Tamil Nadu Arts and Literature and has been maintaining the Vandanam Arts Group.

Thai. Kandasamy (1971–), a law graduate, hails from Valivalam Koilpathu, situated between Keelvenmani and Tirukuvalai of Tiruvarur district. *Thani Iruttu* is his first collection of poems.

Mathivannan alias Mohandoss (1971–) is a poet and his poetry collections appeared as *Nerindu* (2000) and *Namakkidayilana Tholaivu* (2005). He was honoured by the Tamil Nadu Kalai Ilakkiya Perumandram in 1994. A collection of his essays appeared as *Velichatirkaana Pudaikuzhikal* (2005). He has edited a collection of essays, *Ul Othukeedu—Cila Paarvaikal* (2007), and *Jati, Ethir Varkam* (2010) focusing on the issues concerning the Arunthathiyars. He founded the Tamilnadu Sakkiya Arunthathiyar Sangam in 2010, and started a journal, *Vellaikkuthirai*, in 2011. He is working as radiographer in Perundurai Medical College.

Prathiba Jeyachandran (1956–) is a poet and short-story writer. His collection of stories appeared as *Puthahathilirundhu Purappatta Prathimaigal* (1996). He prepared the script for the short film, *Ethirveechu* (1998), directed by K. Rangaraj. He was part of the editorial team of the magazine, *Puthiya Kodangi*. His poem, 'Kanavukalai Tholaikka Vendaam', was part of an AIR Poetry Reading event for the Republic Day celebration. He was honoured with the 'Cirpi Award for Literature'. He is a resource person in the Tamil Nadu Government's sensitization programme for bureaucracy on the welfare of SC/STs. He has written a play, *Kooppu*, staged by K.A. Gunasekaran for the Drama Festival held at Pondicherry and works in a nationalized bank.

Bharathi Nivedan alias Selvakumar (1976–) is a poet whose poetry collections appeared as *Evalin Arikkai* (2006) and *Veru Kaalam Marutthu Thayam Podubavarkal* (2008). A collection of his essays appeared as *Kavidai Iyangiyal* (2007). He was honoured by the Tamil Nadu Government for his poetry in 2010 and is now teaching in a college in Tiruchy. His poetry was translated into Malayalam by N.D. Rajkumar.

Abimani alias E. Mani (1958–) is a short-story writer, whose stories appeared as *Nookkadu* (1993), *Paaram Sumappavarkal* (1994),

Panai Muni (1998), *Thettam* (2001), *Uoorsoru* (2003), *Matravarkal* (2005), and *Ethiraga* (2004). He was honoured by the Bharathi Murpookku Vaalibarkal Sangam and Tiruppur Tamil Sangam. His story, 'Uoorsoru', won the Kalki Memorial Prize and the collection *Uoorsoru* won the Tamil Nadu Government award. The collection *Ethiraga* won the Murpokku Ezhuthalar Sangam Award. He works in the Thoothukudi port.

V. Venkatasalam (1968–) is a poet and short-story writer. His poetry collection, *Oli Pukaa En Azhagiya Veedu* appeared in 2002 and short-story collection, *Pachai Manasu* in 2007. He is a graduate in history and works as Senior Technician in Neyveli Lignite Corporation.

M. Jeeva (1965–) is a short-story writer, theatre activist, and researcher on drama. Of the seven plays that she made, *Thee* and *Cheriyin Thalatu* focused on issues concerning Dalits. Her poetry collection, *Uyirppitaha Vanantharangal* appeared in 2007. She was honoured with the State award for her *China Pena* (2010). Her short story, *Tamil Neyam* (2005) received the Best Short Story Award in 2005. She is Assistant Professor in Tamil at Bharathiyar University, Coimbatore.

S. Sukirtharani (1973–), made the documentary, *She Writes*, that won the Best Documentary prize at the Fourth Three Continents International Documentary Festival, Venezuela (2005), featured her as one of the significant feminist poets in Tamil. Her poem, 'Appavukku Gyabaga Marathi Athigam' was made into a short film by Poonguil Sivakumar. Her other poetry collections are, *Iravu Mirugam* (2004), *Avalai Mozhipeyarthal* (2006), and *Theendappadatha Mutham* (2010). Of these, *Avalai Mozhipeyarthal* won the 'Pavalar Yezhu Gyayiru Award' in 2007. In the same year she won the Pudhumai Pithan Ninaivu award. She teaches in a higher secondary school.

Ku. Umadevi (1983–) is a poet, theatre activist, and PhD scholar, whose poetry collection appeared as *Thisaigalai Parugiavargal* (2006). Her 'poetry reading' featured in the cultural fest 'Chennai Sangamam' conducted by the Government of Tamil Nadu. She is a member of *Thudi*, a students' movement that creates awareness among school children. Her non-fictional writings appeared as *Gundalakesy*. She teaches Tamil in Thiyagarajar College, Chennai.

Bama Faustina (1958–) is the most acclaimed Dalit woman writer. She became the first ever Dalit woman writer in Tamil through the publication of *Karukku* (1992) that focuses on caste in the seminary. Lakshmi Holmström's English translation of *Karukku* won the Crossword Award in 2001 and established Bama as a distinct voice in Indian Dalit literature. Her second and third novels, *Sangati* (1994) and *Vanmam* (2009), appeared in English translation through Oxford University Press. Her short-story collection, *Kisumbukkaran* (1996), was translated into English as *Harum, Scarum Saar* by Ravishankar. Her first two works appeared in German, French, Telugu, and Malayalam translations. Bama is a teacher in a school in Uthiramerur, a small village in Kancheepuram district.

P. Sivakami (1957–) is a poet, writer, activist, and IAS official. She has written three novels, *Anandayee* (1993; English trans., 2008), *Palayana Kazhidalum* (1988; English trans. as *The Grip of Change*, 2006), *Kurukku Vettu* (1999), and *Pa.Ka.Aa. Ku-Sila Kurippukal* (1995), four collections of short stories, and a non-fictional work on body politics, *Udalarasiyal* (2008). Her father was an MLA from Perambalur constituency as an independent candidate in 1952–7. During her tenure as Director in Tamil Nadu Adi Dravida Welfare Department, she exposed the problems in the implementation of Special Component Plan. She served as State Secretary of the Bharatiya Samaj Party, contested in election in 2009, and has started the Samooga Samathuva Party in 2010. She organized a movement demanding land rights for Dalit women and campaigned for the rights of transgenders. She edits the journal, *Pudhiya Kodanki*.

Cho. Dharuman (1953–) is widely known as one of the Karisal (referring to four southern districts in Tamil Nadu) writers. He has published two novels, *Thoorvai* (1995) and *Koogai* (2005), and a work of non-fiction, *Villicai Vendar Pichakkutti* (2002). His short-story collections include *Eeram* (1992), *Sogavanam* (1996), and *Vanakumaran* (1998). He was honoured with the State award in 2007, by Toronto University in 2008, best short-story writer of the year in 1992 and again in 1994, and Katha award in 1993. Translations of his stories have appeared in journals like *Indian Literature*, and in national dailies like the *Indian Express*, *Economic Times*, and *The Hindu*. He spent some years working in a textile mill.

K.A. Gunasekaran (1955–) is a folk singer, performer, theatre activist, actor, non-fiction writer, and researcher. He has written more

than 25 books on topics which include, folklore, theatre, Dalit studies, tribal art, Tamil literature and culture, his autobiography, *Vadu* (2005), and his first play, *Bali Aadukal*. His plays appeared as a collection titled *Thodu* (2005). He is instrumental in the formation of 'Dalit theatre' in Tamil Nadu and has staged his plays in European cities. He worked as Professor of Theatre Arts in Pondicherry University and is now the Director of International Institute of Tamil Studies, Chennai.

RAVIKUMAR (1961–) is a poet, short-story writer, translator, biographer, columnist, rights activist, and theorist of the Dalit movement in Tamil Nadu. He has edited more than 30 books. He ran the magazines *Nirapirikai*, *Dalit*, and *Bodhi*, and is presently editing *Manarkeni*. A collection of his writings appeared in English as *Venomous Touch* (Samya: Calcutta, 2009). Some of his significant works include: *Kankaanippin Arasiyal*, *Kothippu Uyarthu Varum*, *Kadakka Mudiyatha Nizhal*, *Tamilaraai Unarum Tharunam*, and *Malcolm X*. His translations of the writings of Edward Said appeared as *Paniya Marukkum Panpaadu* and translations of world short stories appeared as *Velichamum Thanneer Mathirithaan*, *Choli ke Picha ke*. He, along with S. Anand, is running the publishing house, Navayana. He served as Member of Legislative Assembly of Viduthalai Ciruthaikal Katchi during 2006–11. Before entering politics, he worked in a nationalized bank.

K. KRISHNASWAMY (1954–), founder of Puthiya Tamilagam Party, was a practising doctor and an activist demanding fundamental rights for Dalits. He became a significant leader following his agitation against the Kodiyankulam violence on Dalits. He was elected to the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly from Ottapidaram constituency in 1996. He led the protest march in Tirunelveli demanding a wage rise for the Manjolai tea estate workers, of whom 17 persons were killed in police violence. He is presently an MLA in Tamil Nadu.

THOL. THIRUMAVALAVAN (1962–). Following the death of Malaichamy, who formed the Dalit Panthers of India (DPI) in Tamil Nadu, Thirumavalavan resigned from the Forensic Department and entered politics full time in 1988. The DPI boycotted elections until the 1999 general elections. The party allied with 'Tamil Maanila Congress' which represented the Third Front. In 2001, the party became Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi and Thirumavalavan was elected from Mangalore constituency to the State Legislative Assembly. His party got two seats in 2006 elections to the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly, including, Ravikumar, one of the editors of this anthology. In 2009, Thirumavalavan was elected to Parliament from the Chidambaram Lok Sabha constituency. His writings and speeches appeared in English translation as *Talisman* and *Uproot Hindutva* (2003).

SUDHAKAR KATHAK alias Sudhakar (1967–), named himself after the filmmaker Ritvik Kathak as Sudhakar Kathak. Of the 16 short stories he has written, *Varaivu* won the Katha award for the best Tamil short story in 1997. Another story, *Udavi* got the best short story award of Tamil daily, *Dinamani*. He works as Assistant Engineer in the Public Works Department, Cuddalore.

A. VINCENT RAJ (1972–) is a poet and social activist. He published a collection of poetry titled *Vazhipokkan* (1996) and established the human rights organization, Evidence in 2005. As a human rights activist, he has conducted a study of caste-based atrocities on Dalits in nearly 600 reserved panchayats, focusing on the problems of Dalits.

YAZHAN AADHI (1970–) is a poet and essayist. He has published the four poetry collections: *Isai Uthir Kaalam* (2003), *Sevipparai* (2004), *Nedun Thee* (2006), and *Kaspa* (2008). He is a regular contributor to the magazine *Dalit Murasu*.

KABILAN (1967–) is one of the popular lyricists in Tamil filmdom. He has done his research on the 'Slumsongs of Chennai' and his poetry collections include: *Aagaatha Arimugam*, *Theru Ooviyam*, and *Meipaadu*. After serving six years in Chennai passport office, he left to be a full-time lyricist. He was given the Tamil Nadu Government award for best lyric of the year in 2007. In addition, he secured the award of the Cirpi Arakkattalai in 2001 for his poetry collection, *Theru Ooviyam*.

RA. ATHIYAMAAN alias R. Subbarao (1952–) is an activist who served in the Youth Guidance Service and Tamil Nadu All Arunthathiyar Sangam Coordination in the 1980s. In 1994, he established the Adi Tamizhar Peravai, as part of the Dalit uprising of the 1990s, incorporating all those belong to Arunthathiyar community and by combining the ideas of Ambedkar and Periyar. He organized the first ever conference of those working as sweepers and scavengers in 2004. He conducted a rail blockade in protest against manual scavenging in the Railways in 2005. The petition he submitted to the Chief Minister Karunanidhi in 2006, claiming

Tamil origin for the Arunthathiyars (who are normally regarded as Telugu-speaking immigrants), gave way to the demand for separate reservation for Arunthathiyars. In 2008, the Tamil Nadu Government announced 3 per cent reservation for them as recommended by a judicial commission. He served in the Tamil Nadu Regional Passport Office.

K.T. Gandhirajan, artist and art historian, has a Masters Degree in Art History and Aesthetics from Madurai Kamaraj University. Since 1995 he has been doing archaeological research and documentation of cave and temple mural paintings. He has participated in the discovery of twenty important pre-historic painting sites in Tamil Nadu and is involved in heritage awareness programmes.

Notes on Translators

Prabha Nair, born and raised in Singapore, was an Education Officer with the Singapore Ministry of Education, a freelance writer and reporter for the *Straits Times*. She has published articles and short stories for the *Tamil Murasu* (Singapore) and *Tamil Nesan*, a Malaysian newspaper. She wrote the script for *Bharata Chudar*, a twelve-episode Tamil programme for Singapore Television.

Meera Rajagopalan is a freelance editor and translator whose PhD in English was on utopian literature from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century. She worked in the publication unit of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai.

Malini Seshadri is a freelance writer and editor based in Chennai. She has translated the novel *Vanmam* by Bama from Tamil into English and is co-author of a series of school textbooks on value education, published by Oxford University Press (OUP). She has co-edited a textbook, *Reading and Reality* (OUP, 2010), linking literature with contemporary issues, for the University of Calicut, Kerala.

S. Theodore Baskaran's *Message Bearers: Entertainment Media and Nationalistic Politics* is considered a pioneering book in the area of popular culture. He writes both in English and Tamil, on cinema and also on conservation. He has translated biologist Ullhas Karanth's book *The Way of the Tiger* into Tamil as *Kanurai Vengai*. He was awarded the Ki.Va.Ja. prize by Kamban Kazhagam, Chennai. He has written three books on Tamil cinema and two on wildlife. A former civil servant, he now lives in Bengaluru.

Lakshmi Holmström is a writer and translator. She has translated stories and novels by the major contemporary writers in Tamil. Her most recent books are: *The Rapids of a Great River: The Penguin Book of Tamil Poetry* (2009), of which she is a co-editor, and *The Hour Past Midnight* (2009), a translation of a novel by Salma. In 2000, she received the Crossword Book Award for her translation of *Karukku* by Bama and in 2007 she shared the Crossword-Hutch Award for her translation of Ambai's stories,

In a Forest, a Deer. She received the Iyal Award from the Tamil Literary Garden, Canada, in 2008.

MEENA KANDASAMY is a poet, writer, and translator. She was a Writer-in-Residence at the University of Iowa's International Writing Program 2009. Her debut poetry collection, *Touch*, was published in 2006 and second one, *Ms. Militancy*, was published in 2010.

D. VENKATARAMANAN is an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Madras. After his PhD on Russian fiction, he served in the editorial team of *The Indian Express* and assistant editor in *Orient Longman*. He has contributed to national and international journals on issues relating to fiction and communication studies. He has also written articles, reviews for *The Hindu* and *The Indian Express* and also served as freelance editor. He has done a UGC project on 'Copy Editing' and a project on 'Copywriting' for the University of Madras.

RAVI SHANKER translates from Malayalam and Tamil into English and Malayalam. He has translated works by Dario Fo, Paulo Friere, Freidrich Durrenmatt, Bertolt Brecht, and Badal Sircar into Malayalam as theatre projects and published works. Has written a play, *Mritabharatam*, in Malayalam. His English translations include *Harum Scarum Saar and Other Stories* by Bama (from Tamil), *Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C.K. Janu* by Bhaskaran (from Malayalam), and *Waking is Another Dream*, an anthology of Sri Lankan Tamil poetry (along with Meena Kandasamy). He has also written English subtitles for two Malayalam feature films (*Shayanam* and *Ramanam*) and one Tamil feature film (*Sengadal*).

TARA MURALI is an architect committed to heritage conservation research and promotion. She is involved in citizen's welfare movements and the concerns of the Consumer Action Group, Chennai.

VASANTHA SURYA has written articles and reviews for major Indian publications, translated novels, short stories, and poetry from and into Tamil. She has also written children's books, and poems in English. Her translations from Tamil include novels by R. Chudamani, Sa Kandasamy, Vaasanthi, and A. Madhaviah. *A Place to Live* is the second edition of a collection of her translations of outstanding contemporary Tamil short fiction. She has translated poems of Brecht and Rilke (German) into Tamil, and a narrative folk poem from Bundeli Hindi into English (*The Ballad of Budhni*). *The Stalk of Time*, shortlisted for the Commonwealth Poetry Prize, and *A Word Between Us* are her two poetry collections in English. Her works for children includes *Mridu in Madras*, translated into Tamil by Prema Srinivasan and herself in three volumes as *Medraasil Mirudu*, and Ramayana, serialized in *Chatterbox* magazine.

C.T. INDRA taught in the Department of English, University of Madras. She has translated Indira Parthasarathy, Ambai, Ashokamitran, Sivakami among others. She won the Katha Award for translating Ambai's *Deer in the Forest*. She has reviewed books on translation for *The Hindu*. She was coordinator and translator for Tamil for two British Council Projects: The Representations of the West in South Indian Short Fiction (subsequently published as *Routes*, Macmillan, 2001) and the Interface between English and South Indian Languages from 1700 to 2000. Her other publications in translation include Indira Parthasarathy's *Legend of Nandan* (OUP, 2003) and *Ramanujan* (in collaboration with T. Sriraman, OUP, 2007). Her UGC Major Research Project has been Toward a New Historiography: With Special Reference to Translations and Theory in Post-1980 Tamil Literary Scene.

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S. ANAND is the co-founder of Navayana, an independent press that focuses on caste from an anti-caste perspective. He is the co-author of *Bhimayana* (2011), the graphic biography of B.R. Ambedkar, and of *Brahmans and Cricket* (2003), a polemical critique of cricket, *Laagan*, and caste. Before turning to publishing full time, he was a journalist for ten years and worked for *Outlook*, *The Hindu*, *Indian Express*, and *Deccan Chronicle*.

MEENAKSHI HARIHARAN has been Associate Professor of English at Queen Mary's College, Chennai. She has taught Translation and Creative Writing and Dalit Writing Courses. She was part of the IREX project of Wollongong University (2005) and she received Australia India Council's funding to continue her research in Deakin University, Melbourne. She is translating Hazel Edwards'

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N. Kalyan Raman is a translator of contemporary Tamil fiction and poetry based in Chennai. He has published five volumes of Tamil fiction in English translation, chiefly of work by Ashokamitran, the eminent Tamil littérateur. An anthology, in English translation, of poetry by women from Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka was published in Sahitya Akademi's *Indian* Literature in 2009. He contributes translations, essays, and review articles regularly to magazines, journals, and online publications.

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